

SAMUEL BECKETT AND BILINGUALISM:  
HOW THE RETURN TO ENGLISH INFLUENCES THE LATER WRITING STYLE  
AND GENDER ROLES OF ALL THAT FALL AND HAPPY DAYS

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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses Samuel Beckett's bilingualism in an effort to better understand how the author's use of language affected his writing style and depiction of gender in his later writing. Beckett began writing in English, switched to French for the composition of new works for ten years, and then returned unexpectedly to English. His first English works are characterized by stylistic virtuosity, erudition, and misogyny. Beckett's adoption of French radically changed his writing. His style became uncomplicated, spare, and cerebral. Plot structure based on a journey in early works was abandoned in favor of static situations and dialogue. Women were either ignored or viewed negatively. In 1956, Beckett returned to his mother language with All that Fall, a radio play written for the BBC. Once again, Beckett's writing style changed drastically. The setting and language are distinctively Irish, the plot is built around a trip to the train station, and the protagonist is a woman. The play verges on being a work of music as a result of the strong influence of Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" and the musical arrangement of all the sounds and language in the play. Another play from the second English period, Happy Days, displays a more balanced synthesis of style and contains elements of both the English and French writing. It retains the French period qualities of static plot and simple language; however, it has a female protagonist who may be, in part, based on the author's mother. In conclusion, the study of these two plays in the context of Beckett's bilingualism shows the influence of the mother tongue on writing style and the introduction of positive depictions of women.

# CHAPTER 1. BECKETT'S UNIQUE BILINGUALISM

This dissertation will develop the thesis that Beckett's unique bilingualism has a significant and demonstrable effect on his writing style and the attitudes toward women present in his work. Thus, I take the novel approach that Beckett's works, which may be viewed as occurring in three distinct periods, are defined by the language he used in composing the new works of each respective period. The English-French-English pattern that emerges from this division forms the framework for this study. Beckett's own remarks on the subject of his switch to French are quite famous, and indeed other critics before me have studied the implications of this switch to French. However, none have divided his works into a tripartite structure in order to fully explore this change. Furthermore, the other major linguistic shift in his career, the return to English, has been largely ignored as it relates to his entire body of work. This dissertation will show that Beckett's return to English is an equally momentous if fortuitous event in his writing career because it brings together the stylistic and biographical elements present in his early English writing with the focused themes of his mature French work.

This first chapter will provide background information both on Beckett and the current state of Beckett studies. It will address Beckett's relationship with the languages that shaped him personally and professionally. I will demonstrate with specific examples the extent to which Beckett criticism remains largely divided along national lines. This discussion will state the motivation for the present study and what contribution it will make to the field of Beckett criticism. This historical sketch will provide the proper context for my division of Beckett's work into three major periods based on the language of composition of new works. The latter half of the chapter will discuss the first English

period in three specific areas: plot structure, language, and gender. I will draw examples from one of Beckett's most important early works, Murphy.

The second chapter will begin with an introduction that details the circumstances under which Beckett began to compose new works exclusively in French. Although the evidence shows this shift to be quite gradual, it was one of which Beckett was well aware. The author's own remarks about writing in French and English will then be analyzed. I will take up what some have called Beckett's "self-imposed" exile and examine what aspects of French drew Beckett to the language and, at the same time, what qualities of English repelled him. Many critics claim Beckett's ongoing battles with his mother were the main reason for his flight to France and, hence, I will address this relationship. In the latter half of the chapter I will present a thorough reading of the work I consider most representative of the French period, En attendant Godot.

The third chapter recounts Beckett's unexpected return to English in 1955. I begin with a description of the author's later works in English and the major ways in which they differ from his work in French. Next, I address both the creative problems Beckett seemed to be facing at the end of the French period as well as the request he received from the BBC for a work in English, which opened up a new avenue of creative possibilities. Not only was this play to be different by being in English, but also by being a radio play. Beckett had not previously worked in this medium and he became deeply interested in the special challenges and opportunities it promised. This chapter concludes with a focused treatment of gender issues in Beckett's work, based largely on Linda Ben-Zvi's germinal work, Women in Beckett, in addition to a review of the biographical elements that recall Beckett's mother in the play Footfalls.

Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted entirely to two works by Beckett, the radio play All that Fall and the play Happy Days. In each chapter, I develop the discussion of these two works in parallel fashion, addressing point by point the plot structure, language, themes, female protagonist, and echoes of Beckett's mother. This provides an extensive mechanical analysis that may be evaluated against the backdrop of Beckett's early work in English and mature French work, as discussed in previous chapters.

The final chapter of the study draws several conclusions from the analysis of Beckett's unique bilingualism that manifested itself over his entire writing career. I argue that if Beckett's conscious choice to compose fiction in French represents a strategic departure from the style and themes of his works first composed in English, his efforts in the French period provide many clues as to what Beckett wants to purge from his writing. Even a cursory examination of the French texts, such as En Attendant Godot, shows that Beckett strips away the patent autobiographical elements and the playful and poetic language that had characterized his earlier work. Throughout the French period Beckett's use of the language to peel away the layers of unnecessary details in his prose perfectly complements his use of narrative techniques to the same end. Ultimately, however, this effort stalls and when Beckett finds himself in what some critics have called a creative impasse, he receives a request from the BBC for a new play in English. This unexpected event precipitates his return to English and with it a change in writing style. Childhood memories appear and a reinvigorated influence of music and poetry can be felt in the writing, in particular from Schubert and Dante, respectively. Indeed, the town setting of All that Fall is a close parallel to his own hometown of Foxrock and, I will argue, is largely based on the sonata musical form, specifically, Schubert's sonata "Death and the

Maiden.” As for the influence of poetry, references to Dante can be found in many of Beckett’s works, none so much as in Happy Days, which follows the structure of Dante’s meeting of Farinata and Calvacante in Inferno X.

With the return to English comes the emergence of fully developed female protagonists heretofore absent in his writing. The stylistic pitfalls that Beckett had claimed he was trying to avoid with the switch to French, along with some new elements, emerge when Beckett returns to English. Furthermore, writing once again in his mother tongue allows Beckett to come full circle in his writing style without sacrificing the textual economy and thematic focus French afforded him.

### **1.1 General Information about Beckett and Language: English/French/Italian**

A thorough study of Beckett’s bilingualism must take into account all of the languages he spoke and studied. Many volumes of critical work are devoted to Beckett’s relationship to his acquired languages: French, Italian, and, to some extent, German. Specifically, critics tend to rely on Beckett’s French when searching out aesthetic and stylistic influences, on his Italian when tracking down sources, and on German when considering the plays for which he oversaw production in Germany. And yet, many critics take for granted his relationship to English. The complex relationship Beckett had with English provides an invaluable point of departure for a study of individual works as well as a helpful backdrop for understanding the linguistic shifts that take place over the course of his writing career. Beckett’s relationship to his mother tongue is an indispensable element of the present study.

Before one may consider Beckett’s membership in the Anglophone community, it is worthwhile to treat this linguistic issue exhaustively and consider his link to the



language of his ancestors, Gaelic. Though the centuries-long British colonial period brought about the virtual destruction of Gaelic by the time Beckett was born, it remains an influence, albeit minor, on his writing.

One critic, Ann Beer, in her essay “Beckett’s Bilingualism,” does raise this issue. Beer emphasizes that Beckett was born into a linguistically divided nation and that this division is of central importance to Irish culture. The nationalist movement that was so prominent during Beckett’s lifetime highlights this fact. The ancient Celtic culture and, in particular, the Gaelic language have served to unify resistance to British dominance around an almost mythic past. The dual linguistic/nationalist struggle of the early twentieth century in Ireland is a major influence on Irish writers, including Samuel Beckett. This was a time of great upheaval and political turmoil. The Irish Republican Army is organized by Michael Collins from what is left of the rebels after the failed Easter Rebellion in 1916. And in 1922, the Irish Free State is established.

Indeed, Beckett makes linguistic references to the Irish nationalist movement in his later play, All that Fall, which I will examine in detail in Chapter four. One must not, however, overestimate the importance of these elements in Beckett’s work, for it is clear that Beckett was born into a wealthy English-speaking Protestant family and embraced neither the Gaelic language nor the Irish nationalist movement. For Beer, the existence of Gaelic is most important for allowing Beckett to view English as one of many possible languages in which to work and develop as an intellectual.<sup>1</sup> Beer sums up Beckett’s early period of linguistic exploration when she writes, “In both critical and imaginative writing, he seemed to grasp that the ‘old ego,’ both ‘minister of dullness’ and ‘agent of security’ (*PTD*, 21), could be left behind, and the new ego welcomed, through the shifts

of consciousness and expression that an acquired language made possible.”<sup>2</sup> Here, Beer is quoting phrases from Beckett’s early monograph Proust that demonstrate both traces of his future creative/intellectual efforts and the vehicle (French) of their accomplishment. Beer further points out the motivational force behind such a linguistic switch when she quotes More Pricks than Kicks, “Perhaps only the French language can give you the thing you want,” remarking that Beckett’s personal needs as a writer justify the change. What are these needs and what is the “thing” Beckett wants? Is it an escape from the overwhelming wealth of connotations and tendency towards poetry that English presents? Does he want an entirely new means of expression, a foreign language that, like a tool in his hands, can be consciously manipulated? Does Beckett want to escape his mother and his homeland? All these issues are at the heart of this examination of Beckett’s work. An important aspect of the thesis outlined above is that Beckett chooses to use French to explore metaphysical and autobiographical questions he could not face in English until his unexpected return to his mother tongue at the end of the French period. These questions will be addressed in the following chapters. But first it is necessary to provide a linguistic context for these arguments.

At this point it is useful to observe several basic differences between English and French in order to better consider Beckett’s use of both languages. The following remarks focus primarily on Beckett’s self-translations when comparing his writing in one language with the other. This may assist in the study of Beckett’s translations of his own work, but, it must be made clear that Beckett’s self-translations are not the focus of this dissertation. I am interested here in the differences between the two languages,

specifically those qualities of French that may have initially motivated Beckett's switch to French.

Lance St. John Butler, in his article "Two Darks: A Solution to the Problem of Beckett's Bilingualism," takes the unorthodox view that the divergence between original works and Beckett's own translations results from "the radical incommensurability of languages" and the impossibility of translation rather than authorial intention.<sup>3</sup> Butler has recourse to the French study, "Stylistique comparée du Français et de l'Anglais", by J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet when demonstrating the differing natures of English and French. He develops the convincing argument that Beckett did not intentionally change second versions of his work to make them clearer or rethink his earlier ideas, as some critics have maintained, but made changes simply because of the "external imperatives of language, culture and self-consistency."<sup>4</sup>

Butler, citing a fundamental tenet of structuralism, claims that a comprehensive mastery of any text, much less a bilingual one, is impossible. Butler sets out his goal thus, "I shall argue in this paper that the impossibility of a 'definitive study' of Beckett's bilingualism is only a special case of the general impossibility of managing a 'definitive study' of any text and that the definitive as telos is a chimera."<sup>5</sup> Butler widens the field of inquiry from differences between Beckett's French or English to differences between the French and English languages themselves. In doing so, he enumerates Vinay and Darbelnet's seven "procédés de traduction" or "methods of translation" in ascending order of difficulty. These are, "emprunt" or "borrow," "calque" or "word-for-word correspondence," "traduction littérale" or "literal translation," "transposition" or "transposition," "modulation" or "modulation," "équivalence" or "equivalence," and

“adaptation” or “adaptation.” Moving from one category to the next requires a greater knowledge of culture and language. For example, on the first level one might translate the borrowed word “hamburger” from French to English without change, while at the highest level one would translate an idiomatic expression such as “fumer comme un pompier,” literally, “smoke like a fireman” to “smoke like a chimney.”

Butler synthesizes the following five generalizations about French and English from Vinay and Darbelnet’s remarks:

French has more “animisme” than English, this being defined as a “démarche de la langue qui tend à donner aux choses le comportement des personnes” or “linguistic method that tends to assign things the behavior of people.”

French operates on the “plan de l’entendement” or “realm of understanding/consciousness” and with abstraction rather than on English’s preferred “plan du réel” or “realm of the real” which involves the concrete – among many examples we can cite “dress rehearsal” for “répétition générale.” French requires more “education” than English – Vinay and Darbelnet give the example of an “eye-witness” who becomes “un témoin oculaire.”

English has a certain “besoin du dynamisme” or “need for dynamism” – “J’arrive” needs prepositions: “I’ll be right over” or “right along” or “right up” or “right down.”

French can be more concise than English.<sup>6</sup>

“Gains et pertes” or “gains and losses”: English and French do not fit over one another neatly; there are nuances available to an English speaker unavailable to a Francophone and vice-versa. One language will add something that the other, when the text is translated back again, will have to lose.<sup>7</sup>

Butler continues with examples from Beckett’s texts and self-translations that illustrate the above-listed differences between French and English. One of the more striking examples is taken from the first novel of the trilogy, Molloy, and is used to show “Transposition” at work. The two versions are: “Enfin, il faut sans doute,” and “Well, I suppose you have to.” Butler explains that “I suppose” is a natural transposition of “il

faut sans doute.” However, in French there is no subject pronoun and, more importantly, “I suppose” is the literal opposite of “sans doute” or “without doubt.”

I will not outline all of Butler’s examples, yet I will review the main differences between the opposing critical views of Butler and Fitch regarding Beckett’s bilingualism. Essentially, Fitch views Beckett’s two versions as the same work in two texts. As Butler points out, this view relies on authorial intentionality to posit some supernatural reality that is expressed in a given language. In more concrete terms, one may think of two texts, A and B, expressing the reality, C, in two different languages. Butler unequivocally rejects the possibility of what Fitch calls a “transcendental signified” when studying Beckett’s bilingualism.

Here is a quote from Butler that sums up his thesis well. “Where he [Beckett] appears to make a change or to develop a thought or simply to omit or add gratuitously, it is most likely that he is responding not to an internal imperative to revise earlier work but to the external imperatives of language, culture, and self-consistency.” Aside from his convincing examples, Butler’s view also fits well with the oft-repeated description of Beckett as a tireless and exacting craftsman who worked meticulously on his texts until he felt they were acceptable. Otherwise, he rejected them. If this is an accurate portrayal of his work ethic when creating new fiction, there is no reason to believe this would change when he turned to the translation of his own works.

Butler’s discussion of Marjorie Perloff’s essay, “Une Voix pas la mienne: French/English Beckett and the French/English Reader” in Friedman’s collection<sup>8</sup> is important in regard to the view of Beckett’s bilingualism I develop in this dissertation. I agree with Butler’s view that Perloff is substantially in agreement with Fitch that

Beckett's translations are "different texts" from the originals. But what I am interested in is his treatment of her explanation of *why* the translations differ from the originals.

Butler agrees that the intertextual references of one literature do not work in another and therein finds support for his incommensurability thesis. Yet, he disagrees when Perloff suggests that Beckett is aware of the differences between English and French and consciously uses them to his advantage. He also strongly disagrees when Perloff suggests that Beckett's mood is noticeably different when he writes in one language or the other and then attributes this to his different experiences in each socio-linguistic setting: Ireland where childhood and education equal happiness and France where maturity and war equal angst. Of this comment, Butler writes, "But the biographical explanation is very doubtful when compared to the solid fact of linguistic incommensurability.... It was the languages that wrote him, not he the languages."<sup>9</sup> Once again, Butler emphasizes Beckett's conformity to the linguistic and cultural exigencies of the French language. His view is essentially ontological. Ultimately, both positions are supported with convincing arguments, and yet I do not see them as mutually exclusive. Therefore, I would seek a middle ground that allows for both visions of Beckett's bilingualism. Certainly, as Butler makes clear, the nature of language, in this case, the English and French languages, makes "definitive" translations impossible. However, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a master of languages such as Beckett would be aware of these differences and choose one language over the other for his work, at least in the beginning.

This discussion of the differences between French and English in the specific context of translation has served to highlight those characteristics of French that Beckett favored in his writing and found most useful. The animism, education, and economy of

French seem to jibe well with Beckett's own personality and mature style of writing. Later, I will develop the argument that Beckett made the conscious choice to switch to French in 1945 because it suited his overall project as a writer and allowed him to strip away unnecessary layers of meaning in his writing. When he returned to English, though the decision to switch was facilitated by an unforeseen request, the effect on the writing of the mother tongue is the same: more autobiographical, more poetic and lighter, more colloquially humorous.

## **1.2 Overview of Beckett Criticism**

A highly unusual state of affairs exists in Beckett studies today. It is a commonplace in the field that the English- and French-speaking worlds have two very distinct views of Beckett that have developed largely along linguistic boundaries. This in turn has given rise to two major schools of criticism, one Anglophone and one Francophone. There are also burgeoning bodies of German and Italian criticism; however, for this bilingual study I will limit the scope of inquiry to the Anglophone and Francophone publics.<sup>10</sup> Limiting this analysis to the languages and cultures in which Beckett primarily lived and worked will allow me to explain more adequately the need for the present study in Beckett criticism.

As Brian Fitch points out in his book, Beckett and Babel: An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work, two distinct and very different critical discourses have developed in response to Beckett's work.<sup>11</sup> During the early part of his career as a writer, Beckett published only in English and was naturally known only to the Anglophone public. His collection of loosely connected short stories, More Pricks than Kicks, his poems, his critical piece on Proust, and his first novel Murphy placed him in

what Fitch terms the “long tradition of English language writers, going from Sterne to Joyce.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed Beckett is often compared with his Irish contemporary, James Joyce. Several important studies linking them are Four Dubliners: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, by Richard Ellman, Beckett and Joyce: Friendship and Fiction by Barbara Gluck, and Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: the Stoic Comedians by Hugh Kenner. What is important here is not so much the conclusions drawn by one study or another, but rather the writers and literature with whom Beckett is associated by these literary critics. For instance, the examples cited above all include Joyce, which seems remarkable given how vastly different the two authors’ mature styles are. Beckett’s writing during the French period and beyond attains an unparalleled textual economy, bareness, and minimalism, while Joyce’s work is so rich and so filled with obscure language, allusions, and puzzles that the author once quipped that Ulysses would “keep the professors busy for centuries.”<sup>13</sup> Beckett’s early work, however, does clearly show the influence of James Joyce.

When Beckett began publishing in France, specifically when he published the trilogy in French from 1951 to 1953, the French public, as well as its critics, associated him with his publishing house, Jérôme Lindon’s Editions de Minuit, and the remarkable group of authors linked with it. Thus, French critics consider Beckett to be among the avant-garde creators of the Nouveau Roman, like Alain Robbe-Grillet (Les Gommages 1953, Le Voyeur 1955.) The scope of this dissertation does not allow for a detailed analysis of Robbe-Grillet, yet it is worthwhile to note that he experiments with space and time in his works. Another avant-garde writer associated with Lindon was Nathalie Sarraute (Martereau 1953, Portrait d'un Inconnu 1947). Beckett’s trilogy can easily be



seen to take part in the larger effort by these writers to rework the novel and conventional ideas of plot, chronology, characterization, and narrative point of view.

Further complicating the state of Beckett criticism is the fact that many of the early English texts were not translated into French or translated only very late. Fitch writes, "All the early material that roots Beckett so clearly in the Irish literary tradition is unknown to the vast majority of the French public and the critics that serve it, and this fact cannot but have a bearing on their overall appreciation of his achievement as a writer."<sup>14</sup> Fitch also notes that because of the order of publication and late translations, the French public has read much of Beckett's earlier work in the light of his more famous works published first in French in the 1950s. Fitch, however, is concerned in his study with determining the status of the second versions of Beckett's works, translated by the author whether they be in English or French.

The state of Beckett criticism is also addressed in the book Critique of Beckett Criticism: A Guide to Research in English, French and German, by Murphy, P.J., et al. The tome presents an exhaustive survey of Beckett criticism including bibliographies, manuscripts, editions, periodicals, and special studies. The survey is organized into three main chapters according to language - English, French, and German. The book begins with a short introduction and ends with an even shorter conclusion (three paragraphs.) The authors state their aim in the preface to "give an overview of the state of the art in Beckett criticism by supplying more than an annotated bibliography."<sup>15</sup> They hardly succeed. The authors, in the introduction, focus on the German criticism as the most important, claiming that the English work has reached a "theoretical crossroads" and dismissing the French studies as having "ebbed dramatically."

Although the authors give insightful reviews of the major and even some minor studies of Beckett in the three languages, they completely ignore the lack of communication between critics in these languages except to note with disapproval that the majority of the German work is unknown to English-speaking critics. Unfortunately, this book does not achieve more than a well-annotated bibliography of the works of Beckett criticism in three languages and worse, furthers the bias of schools of criticism divided along linguistic lines by structuring the study accordingly. The conclusion to the book leaves something to be desired when its authors write, “This guide to research should, above all, have made two points very clear: a great deal of valuable work has been accomplished in the three traditions surveyed; a great deal more remains to be done” and again when, in poor imitation of Beckett they write, “but the struggle to find and give new meanings to his works must go on, it will go on.”<sup>16</sup>

One final example of the disarray of Beckett studies can be drawn from Helen Astbury’s essay, “Samuel Beckett’s (Linguistic) Exile: Continuity through Separation.” In this essay, Astbury briefly reviews one striking example of the existing confusion in Beckett studies when she points out that in at least one library in Ireland the whole of Beckett’s work is classified under the class mark 842 which, in the Dewey classification system, is reserved for French theater. This may be the expected classification for works originally written in French such as the trilogy or En attendant Godot. However, it is remarkable, to say the least, that works such as Dream of Fair to Middling Women, More Pricks than Kicks and Worstward Ho should be found there since, as Astbury makes clear, these works were written in English but never translated by Beckett into French.<sup>17</sup>

Astbury implies that what began as Beckett's exile from Ireland has been carried on by the critics and librarians who unjustly exclude his works from the Irish literary canon.

From these examples one may conclude that the field of Beckett criticism lacks studies of Beckett as a primarily bilingual writer that address in a comprehensive way his use of language over time. Critics have succumbed to the temptation to categorize his work into one tradition or another and proceed accordingly. The few works that have been done that take into account Beckett's bilingualism concern translation and particularly Beckett's self-translations. These studies seek to determine the status of one version or another and remain limited to individual texts and their translations.

The present study seeks to explore Beckett's bilingualism as it is manifested in his choice of one language or another for the first version of a work. When one considers the first language for Beckett's works, a definite pattern emerges that may shed some light on those works as well as Beckett's creative endeavors over time. Before that can be done, it is necessary to provide more context and examine Beckett's relationships with the countries where the author would spend most of his life, Ireland and France.

### **1.3 Division of Beckett's Writing into Three Periods**

Some brief biographical details can be useful in determining Beckett's relationship with the French language. Clearly, Beckett's interest in France dates to his early education and intellectual curiosity. Beckett studied French and Italian at Trinity College, Dublin and excelled in both. Later trips to France were in part motivated by his desire to improve his speaking ability in French. James Knowlson, in his biography, Damned to Fame, describes Beckett's first visit to France in August 1926 as fitting in well with the young man's literary interests.<sup>18</sup> For this visit, Beckett planned a bicycle

tour of Touraine with visits to Loire Valley chateaux and several literary landmarks of the many writers who had lived there, such as Ronsard, Rabelais, and Descartes. Beckett's lifelong interest in France and the French language are directly related to his literary interests and aspirations in both languages. The trip in 1926 is notable for being Beckett's first; however, he would continue to travel back and forth between France and Ireland, with the majority of his time spent in France, for the rest of his life. He would eventually make Paris his permanent home in 1937. The writer's love for France and French can perhaps be best gleaned from his actions during the war.

As will be noted below in a discussion of Beckett's own comments about French and France, Beckett famously claimed to prefer France in war to Ireland in peace. During the occupation, Beckett stayed in Paris when he could have easily fled to Ireland because of that country's neutrality. Instead, Beckett was a member of a cell of the resistance for which he worked as a secretary and courier. Beckett's cell, codenamed Gloria SMH after the alias of its founding member, Jeannine Picabia, and the reversed initials of "His Majesty's Service," had agents and contacts throughout the occupied zone. Some members collected information on troop movement and mobilization by observing naval activity in the ports of Normandy and Brittany while others were specialists capable of providing counterfeit documents and identity cards. Others took photographs of troop deployments and enemy positions.

Beckett's role was to collect information from agents in the field, sort it, and type it. Once he had a full page, he would take it to another member who would use photographic equipment to produce miniaturized copies the size of a matchbox. This information was then smuggled to the unoccupied zone by Madame Picabia, the

respectable widow of a famous painter and a very unlikely Resistance agent. As Knowlson remarks, this job required a great deal of translation and organization. In addition to this, Beckett had to condense reports as much as possible in order to fit the most information into the least space. Agents who read these reports in England noted the combination of clarity and sheer volume of his work.

Eventually, Beckett's cell was betrayed and of the estimated eighty members, fifty were picked up by the Germans in August and September, 1942. When Beckett's close friend Alfred Peron was arrested, his wife Mania sent Beckett a warning in a thinly disguised telegram that read, "Alfred arrêté par Gestapo. Prière faire nécessaire pour corriger l'erreur", "Alfred arrested by Gestapo. Please do what is necessary to correct the error."<sup>19</sup> Within just a few hours of receiving the message, Beckett warned as many of his friends as possible and he and his companion Suzanne went into hiding. Initially, they stayed in various safe houses in Paris. Knowlson recounts the interesting anecdote that during this time Beckett and Suzanne hid out for ten days with Nathalie Sarraute and her husband, who were on vacation. Eventually, however, the couple came to the conclusion that they should make an attempt to cross into the unoccupied zone. Approximately six weeks after going underground, Beckett and Suzanne made their way to the village of Roussillon. Beckett would spend the next three years in hiding and although under such circumstances writing was impossible, his knowledge of rural French life and language expanded. He survived through hard farm work with villagers who spoke no English. Nor did his companion speak much English. In short, for an extended period of time, French was the language of Beckett's everyday life. Later,

traces of the knowledge gained from this time in the French countryside would appear in his French writing.

What little writing Beckett did in Rousillon during his time there was done on Watt, a novel he had begun in English. For Beckett, writing in French began in earnest after the war, especially during the period from 1946 to 1953. Beckett produced an immense amount of new work during this period, which has led James Knowlson to call this time “a frenzy of writing.” Brian Fitch, in his book, Beckett and Babel: An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work, discusses Beckett’s work during this time with an emphasis on the author’s choice of language for the first version of a work. What is important for the present study, however, is that Fitch lists Beckett’s works, the language in which they were first composed, and date of first publication. What emerges from this analysis is that Beckett limited himself to using only French for first versions of new works during a period of ten years. Fitch points out that Beckett himself says as much when he comments on this prolific period in a letter dated 15 August 1947, addressed to George Reavey. Reavey had written Beckett to tell him of the publisher Hamish Hamilton’s interest in his work in progress. Beckett responded, “All I would have to offer in English being translations from my own French. Perhaps to encourage him with *Watt* [the manuscript of which he had submitted to the publisher], I should say I expect soon to resume writing in English, than which until now few things are less likely.”<sup>20</sup>

This crucial piece of information is the basis for this study’s division of Beckett’s career into three periods during which his choice of language for a first work follows the pattern, English-French-English. While other critics mention this ten-year period or

divide Beckett's career into periods of differing lengths, the divisions that form the structure for this study are unique.<sup>21</sup> This tripartite division of Beckett's career allows for a study of his bilingualism on a greater scale, one that takes into account long periods of time and is not limited to first and second versions of the same work.

#### **1.4 General Information about Beckett's First Publications in English**

As stated above, Beckett's early publications root him in the English literary tradition. Critics argue that these works show the influence of other writers, especially James Joyce. Before I move on to an examination of one important work from this early period, Murphy, some general remarks need to be made about Beckett's early writing in English and, specifically, his treatment of plot structure, language, and gender. These remarks will provide the necessary context for the analysis of the novel that closes this chapter while simultaneously providing a point of comparison for the French works and Beckett's return to English.

It is important to note that Beckett was himself aware of how radically different his prewar and postwar writing were. In fact, after he had become famous he put off publishing More Pricks than Kicks, written in 1934, until the late 1960s. And he did not allow publication of Dream of Fair to Middling Women (written in 1932) until after his death. These are not the only examples of Beckett's reluctance to publish his early work. David Pattie argues in his book, The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett, that Beckett simply felt these works were not good enough. This is not surprising, for Beckett was rarely satisfied with his work and seems to sum up his outlook in Worstword Ho, written and published in English in 1983, in which he writes, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."<sup>22</sup> On the topic of his early writing, Deirdre Bair quotes Beckett's description of

himself at that time as someone, “with the itch to make and nothing to say.”<sup>23</sup> Without doubt, Beckett was unsatisfied with much of his early work that Pattie describes as “radically different in tone and approach” from his more famous works. What are these differences in the early writing and how are they transformed over time in Beckett’s mature work? The first part of this question may be addressed by considering the areas of plot structure, language, and gender. The latter half of the question will be answered in the chapters that follow.

The plot structure of the early works tends to be relatively conventional as compared with the author’s later works in both French and English. This is not to say that these are easy books to read, for they remain highly experimental and often difficult to follow. Ultimately, however, they retain recognizable characters, locations, and rely on the British trope of the journey to move the plot forward.

A good example is Beckett’s posthumously published first novel, Dream of Fair to Middling Women, an autobiographical work set in Dublin, Ireland. The story of Beckett’s first antihero, Belacqua Shuah, whom the publisher (Calder Books) calls an alter-ego for the author, is narrated by a Mr. Beckett. The reader follows Belacqua’s meanderings through Dublin and Europe that are loosely structured around his series of girlfriends (the Smeraldina-Rima, the Frica, the Syracuse, and the Alba.) For Pattie, these women are all modeled on women Beckett knew at this time (Peggy Sinclair, Mary Manning Howe, Lucia Joyce, and Ethna MacCarthy.)<sup>24</sup> These are not the only characters in the novel with real life analogues. James Knowlson remarks, “For many of the figures who appear in the novel are closely based on people whom he knew – in some cases much too closely for this not to have been a source of embarrassment to the older



Beckett, who, after several initial attempts to get it published, became extremely reluctant to see it appear during his own and their lifetimes.”<sup>25</sup>

Pattie notes two ways in which Beckett addresses the problem of generating a plot in the face of a protagonist so overcome with inertia. First, Beckett surrounds his central character with what Pattie calls “comic grotesques” and, second, Beckett himself intrudes in the text with his own comments and concerns.<sup>26</sup>

Beckett’s fascination with language is evident in this early writing. Knowlson comments, “As well as using dictionaries and reference books, Beckett wove into his novel hundreds of quotations from other works of literature, philosophy, and theology.”<sup>27</sup> This novel is characterized by the frequent use of esoteric and abstruse words, along with a tendency toward long and grammatically complex sentences. There are also references to other languages in the form of names and quotes, particularly French and Italian. Knowlson calls the book “Joycean in its ambition and accumulative technique.”<sup>28</sup> David Pattie also believes Beckett’s use of language comes from Joyce’s influence and writes, “As mentioned in the first section, Beckett was indebted to Joyce as an artistic example and role model [12-13], and even though the tone and underlying preoccupations in Beckett’s work are radically different from those of the older writer, the young Beckett shared Joyce’s love of arcane, obscure, and highly allusive language.”<sup>29</sup> Beckett’s collection of short stories, More Pricks than Kicks, provides abundant examples of Beckett’s enthusiasm for striking and unusual language. In addition to sections written in Spanish, French, and German, one need only read the narrator’s description of the Frica,

The eyehole is clogged with the bulbous, the round pale globe goggles exposed. Solitary meditation has furnished her with nostrils of generous bore. The mouth champs an invisible bit, foam gathers at the bitter commissures. The

crateriform brisket, lipped with sills of paunch, cowers  
ironically behind a maternity tunic. Keyholes have wrung  
the unfriendly withers, the osseous rump screams behind  
the hobble-skirt. Wastes of woad worsted advertise the  
patterns. Aïe!<sup>30</sup>

While not all of Beckett's early works were this obscure, the alliteration and pitiless satire in this text are fairly representative of his early style. Here a woman is cruelly described with a vocabulary and style one would expect to be used for a farm animal. Her eyes bulge and nostrils flare. As if this were not enough, she foams at the mouth like some rabid dog. She has unsightly rolls of fat on an altogether disgusting body. Here, one finds an example of harsh treatment of the female that is characteristic of this period in his work.

Consequently, the female characters are often left undeveloped and result in sketches of prostitutes or other unfavorable stereotypes of femininity, which leads to the final element to be considered, gender. Susan Brienza, in her essay, "Clods, Whores, and Bitches: Misogyny in Beckett's Early Fiction," writes, "A concentrated reading of the early fiction reveals a disturbing negative depiction of female characters: coupled with a pervasive disgust, cruel humor, and Swiftian revilement toward her physicality is the idea that woman as a clod of earth impedes intellectual man."<sup>31</sup> Brienza, by way of a close reading of the early fiction, focusing on More Pricks than Kicks, Murphy, and Watt, builds the argument that Beckett alternates between two opposing views of women, each of which is equally based on stereotypes. The first category is the sensual woman overly concerned with matters of appearance and the second is the repellant woman who possesses unrivaled ugliness, to the point of physical deformity. In the fiction, the ugly woman is to be ridiculed and the beautiful woman feared. Brienza argues that for

Beckett's Cartesian heroes, nothing is to be gained intellectually or spiritually from physical love. Romantic love is no better and serves only to distract the male from his more noble endeavors.<sup>32</sup>

Brienza is careful when discussing the misogynistic overtones of this early work to differentiate the narrator from the author. Drawing the line between these two is one of literature's oldest and most difficult questions. It is especially difficult to work this out in the case of Beckett because of the many autobiographical details and intrusions of the author in the early texts. One thing is certain: Beckett shelters his male protagonists from the bitter humor and satire that is almost always directed at the female characters. While Brienza's argument is quite convincing, one weak point is her assertion that Beckett's use of the definite pronoun when naming the women in More Pricks than Kicks serves to reduce, demean, and objectify them. The explanation for the names *the Frica*, *the Alba* and *the Venerilla*, may simply come from spoken Italian where this usage is frequent, endearing, and reserved for women. Of course, this detail does not disprove Brienza's thesis but simply offers an alternative explanation of one point.

As Brienza notes, Beckett's early fiction is heavily populated with prostitutes. The frica, the unnamed previous occupant of Murphy's apartment, and Murphy's girlfriend Celia are all prostitutes. The fact that these women have sex as their livelihood further associates women with the body rather than the mind. A Cartesian split between man/mind and woman/body seems to operate in these works. While this is the case in the early works, I shall demonstrate that this attitude toward women changes dramatically when Beckett returns to English and creates powerful female protagonists that rival in depth, complexity, and suffering any of the males.

## 1.5 Critique of Murphy: Plot Structure, Language, and Gender

Beckett's first novel, Murphy, may be considered representative of Beckett's early English works and will be scrutinized here with the intention of identifying its most significant characteristics. In his essay, "Murphy and the Uses of Repetition," Rubin Rabinovitz points out a host of recurring episodes and symmetries in Beckett's novel. He also notes that early on the book was considered "unchallenging" and that this resulted in part from Beckett's own comments when he said, "It's my easiest book, I guess."<sup>33</sup> Of course, any apparent simplicity belies the book's highly structured complexity, for Beckett also called it "slightly obscure" and "hard to follow."<sup>34</sup> I will limit my analysis to three specific areas: plot structure, language, and gender. The results of this investigation will be used to compare this period of Beckett's writing with the later work. This particular novel, though very difficult and at times hard to follow, retains a relatively conventional plot structure that tells the story of Murphy, an eccentric man who struggles to support his prostitute mistress and eventually goes mad and blows himself up.

The novel opens with Murphy sitting naked in his rocking chair. He ties himself to the chair to give his body pleasure and to free his mind. In the chair, he is able to attain an almost total isolation of the mind, yet he seeks to go further and completely shut out the world. The narrator informs us that Murphy is a Cartesian, "Thus Murphy felt himself split in two, a body and a mind."<sup>35</sup> Murphy seeks the peace and calm of a total retreat into the mind where he may be unconcerned with the chaos of the world surrounding him. Midway through the novel Beckett offers a detailed description of this aspect of Murphy.

The sixth chapter of the novel is devoted to an explanation of “Murphy’s Mind.”<sup>36</sup> One specific strategy Beckett uses to move the plot forward here is to borrow the structure of Dante’s Inferno. Murphy’s mind, like Dante’s vision of hell, is described as a series of concentric circles. The narrator tells us, “Murphy’s mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without.”<sup>37</sup> This sphere is further divided into three zones of increasing depth called light, half light, and dark. To move from one sphere to the next is to move away from the recognizable forms of the world toward a chaos of being. Murphy seeks to isolate himself from the world in the deepest zone of his mind where he is without will or desire and utterly indifferent to everything around him.

When Murphy takes a job as a nurse at the Magdalene Mental Mercy seat, he meets a patient there, a Mr. Endon, whose psychosis makes him completely unreachable. Murphy envies Mr. Endon and recognizes his detachment from the world as his ultimate goal. Murphy is fascinated with this imperturbable patient and attempts to engage him through games of chess, Mr. Endon’s only frivolity. This only fails, as neither player takes any account of the other before moving a piece. This results in games that go on for hours with neither player losing a piece, putting the other player in check, or ever winning the game. In parallel fashion, Murphy is unable to attain Mr. Endon’s attachment through his own actions simply because one cannot will oneself to be free of will. Murphy’s quest, based on the Cartesian split between mind and body, is doomed to failure.

A couple of details worth noting are that the novel reveals Murphy’s home to be West Brompton, London, during the 1930s, and the descriptions of the city given by the

narrator as he follows Murphy and the other characters' peripatetic wanderings are geographically accurate. These details with regard to the novel's setting will form an important point of comparison when discussing the French period and the return to English.

Beckett's use of language in the novel is distinguished by puns, obscure words, long sentences, heavy alliteration, and foreign languages. An examination of several characters' names provides examples. The above-noted Mr. Endon's name puns on Murphy's desire to "end" and the lack of any endgame in their chess match. Miss Carridge puns on birth and death with its alternate spelling, "miscarriage." And Bim Clinch is an unusual name that will reappear in Waiting for Godot, and How It Is.

The following two examples of text demonstrate Beckett's predilection for unusual words, his interest in grammar and issues of gender. The first is an example of the long, grammatically complex sentences characteristic of his early publications:

The oui-ja board is how I live, I come all the way from Paddington to feed the poor dear sheep and now I dare not let her off, here is my card, Rosie Dew, single woman, by appointment to Lord Gall of Wormwood, perhaps you know him, a charming man, he sends me objects, he is in a painful position, spado of long standing in tail male special he seeks testamentary pentimenti from the *au-delà*, how she strains to be off and away, the protector is a man of iron and will not bar, plunge the fever of her blood in the Serpentine or the Long Water for that matter, like Shelley's first wife you know, her name was Harriet was it not, not Nelly, Shelley, Nelly, oh Nelly how I adore you.<sup>38</sup>

This single sentence is an extremely rich piece of text. One notes first the multiplicity of dependent clauses and the evocative names "Rosie Dew" and "Lord Gall." Next, one's attention is drawn to the unusual and foreign words such as, "spado," "pentimenti," from Italian and "au-delà," from French. It evokes, Shelley, a literary figure, and thus writing. It is also filled with assonance and rhyme such as, "tail male"

and “testamentary penitenti,” and finishes in a crescendo of rhyme and repetition with the names Nelly and Shelley. This example is significant, above all, because it utilizes an accumulative technique similar to that of Joyce and is quite the opposite style of Beckett’s later writing.

The second example shows both humor and an example of Beckett’s depiction of gender in the novel. Murphy has just seen a short fat woman he believes has “duck’s disease,” what the narrator tells us is “aptly described in Steiss’s nosonomy as Panpgyoptosis” which, translated, means “all rumps stink.”

The Duck, to give her a name to go on with, held in one hand a large bulging bag and in the other a lead whereby her personality was extended to a Dachshund so low and so long that Murphy had no means of telling whether it was a dog or a bitch, which was the first thing he wanted to know about every so-called dog that came before him.<sup>39</sup>

This brief section of text is a good example of the novel’s humor and its protagonist’s eccentricity. It is also a cruel and mocking description of a woman who makes only a brief appearance in the novel. As noted in the preceding section, women in Samuel Beckett’s early fiction are often depicted unfavorably. As Brienza has noted, they are often based on stereotypes and may be considered either sensual or grotesque. The duck woman obviously fits into the latter category. She is physically deformed and equated with an equally deformed dog. Also noteworthy is Murphy’s obsession with knowing the gender of all the dogs he sees. Revealingly, he makes the assumption they are males and then, when he sees the sex organs, rejects or confirms this assumption.

Prostitution is evoked several times in this novel and is, at least once, lauded as a woman’s greatest achievement. The previous occupant of Murphy’s room was a prostitute described as, “a harlot, long past her best”<sup>40</sup> and the major female character of the novel, Celia, is a prostitute. She receives compliments on her talent and success as a

streetwalker from Mr. Kelly and Murphy. Murphy calls these compliments, “the highest tribute a man can pay a woman.” Celia is also described as dimwitted when she tries to explain her relationship with Murphy to Mr. Kelly. The narrator says she was “racking her brain which was not very large for the best way to say it.”<sup>41</sup> The novel depicts Celia as an unintelligent prostitute who threatens to distract Murphy from his intellectual quest. She supports herself and him with the money she earns. When she asks Murphy to help her get a better job, he berates her for wanting to ruin his life with children and domesticity. While not physically deformed, Celia is nonetheless an object of derision and pitiless humor. Indeed, the novel’s cruelest satire is reserved for its female characters while the male hero remains unscathed.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

Samuel Beckett showed a strong interest in literature and foreign languages, specifically French, from a young age. Although his publications in French were primarily responsible for his fame and recognition, all of Beckett’s work in both French and English merits review if one is to study his writing and his bilingualism. Those who have addressed Beckett’s bilingualism have principally focused on his self-translations in an attempt to determine the status of the second versions of his work. At issue in these studies is whether or not a translation is secondary to the original work or worthy of standing on its own, since the author has written the translation and it is impossible to know if any changes are due to authorial intention or the demands of language.

The present study addresses Beckett’s bilingualism from another angle. Rather than study different versions of a single work, I review Beckett’s choice of language for the first version of a given work. This method allows a more complete study of Beckett’s



writing over time by dividing his career into three distinct periods according to the language Beckett used for first versions of new works. I shall demonstrate that Beckett's switch to French was not an isolated linguistic shift in his career and that the return to English in 1956 is an equally momentous occasion. This study will also provide a more comprehensive view of Beckett's use of language than has come before by investigating how the texts change during the different periods.

The first English period is distinguished by Beckett's use of a discernible plot. The stories generally trace the journeys of the main characters in recognizable cities or countries. Relatively conventional plot lines are developed as we follow the protagonist in his quest to arrive at his destination. Sentences tend to be complex and filled with erudite or obscure vocabulary. Puns abound, as do instances of rhyme and alliteration. Beckett seems to enjoy the virtuosity and richness of the English language. Finally, this period is also distinct in its gender attitudes. Women are depicted as moronic, grotesque, and highly sexual. They threaten the quest of the male protagonist by distracting him with sensuality. They are consistently mocked and derided, while the males remain protected from this biting satire.

Beckett's early work and, in particular, his novel Murphy clearly show his interest in themes that he will develop in subsequent writings for the rest of his life. These themes include the Cartesian split between mind and body, human suffering, alienation, and exile. The eponymous protagonist of Murphy is typical of Beckettian heroes in his disdain for the world and the great misfortunes that constantly befall him. However, this work also displays Beckett's vast learning in his erudite vocabulary and subtle literary references.

This chapter, with its consideration of the early fiction, is the first element of this study of Beckett's bilingualism. The analysis of Beckett's first texts show them to be filled with references to the author's homeland and characterized by a style that tends toward poetry and linguistic complexity while leaving its female characters only sketches based on stereotypes. In the following chapter, I will discuss Beckett's switch to French in 1945. I will consider under what circumstances this shift took place as well as Beckett's own remarks on this decision. I will review Beckett's relationship with his mother and what some critics call his self-exile to France. Beckett's most famous work, En attendant Godot, will be carefully analyzed as a representative work from the French period.

## 1.7 Notes

<sup>1</sup> Beer, Ann. "Beckett's Bilingualism." The Cambridge Companion to Beckett. Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cctl). Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1996. 210-211.

<sup>2</sup>Beer, Ann. p. 211

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Lance St. John. "Two Darks: A Solution to the Problem of Beckett's Bilingualism." Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui: An Annual Bilingual Review/Revue Annuelle Bilingue 3 (1994) p. 115

<sup>4</sup> Butler, Lance St. John. p. 127

<sup>5</sup> Butler, Lance St. John. p. 116

<sup>6</sup> Butler, Lance St. John. p. 116 Butler's endnote to this remark reads, "A point first made by Alexander Fraser-Tytler in his *Essay of the Principles of Translation*, 1791. French "admits a greater brevity of expression than the English."

<sup>7</sup> Butler, Lance St. John. pp. 118-119

<sup>8</sup> Friedman, Alan Warren, Charles Rossman, and Dina Sherzer. Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987. pp. 36-48

<sup>9</sup> Butler, Lance p. 131

<sup>10</sup> Murphy, P. J. Critique of Beckett Criticism : A Guide to Research in English, French, and German. Literary Criticism in Perspective. 1st ed. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994 p. 1. On this point, see also Fitch, Brian T. Beckett and Babel : An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work. University of

Toronto Romance Series; 57. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1988.  
pp. 16-20

<sup>11</sup> Fitch, Brian T. pp. 16-20

<sup>12</sup> Fitch, Brian T. p. 17

<sup>13</sup> Norris, David and Carl Flint. Introducing Joyce. New York: Totem Books, 1997 p. 106

<sup>14</sup> Fitch, Brian T. p. 17

<sup>15</sup> Murphy, P. J. p. 2

<sup>16</sup> Murphy, P. J. p.117

<sup>17</sup> Astbury, Helen "Samuel Beckett's (Linguistic) Exile: Continuity through Separation." Mots Pluriels  
no. 17. April 2001. <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1701ha.html>

<sup>18</sup> Knowlson, James. Damned to Fame : The Life of Samuel Beckett. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.  
pp. 77-78

<sup>19</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 288

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Bair, Deirdre. Samuel Beckett: A Biography. London. Jonathan Cape 1978; Pan Books,  
Picador 1980. pp. 311

<sup>21</sup> Critics divide Beckett's career up differently. One example is Fitch who states, "During the first period  
of his work [Beckett], from 1930 until 1951, (...)"

<sup>22</sup> Beckett, Samuel. Worstward Ho. 1st ed. New York: Grove Press, 1995

<sup>23</sup> Bair, Deirdre. p.84

<sup>24</sup> Pattie, David. The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett. The Complete Critical Guide to English  
Literature. London ; New York: Routledge, 2000 p. 53

<sup>25</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 146

<sup>26</sup> Pattie, David. p. 53

<sup>27</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 145

<sup>28</sup> Knowlson, James. p.145

<sup>29</sup> Pattie, David. p. 51

<sup>30</sup> Beckett, Samuel. More Pricks than Kicks Grove Press New York, 1972 p. 50-51

<sup>31</sup> Brienza, S. "Clods, Whores, and Bitches: Misogyny in Beckett's Early Fiction" in Linda Ben-Zvi's  
Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives pp. 91-105

<sup>32</sup> Brienza, S. p. 92

<sup>33</sup> Gontarski, On Beckett Essays and Criticism Grove Press New York 1986 pp. 67-68

<sup>34</sup> Bair, Deirdre p. 243

<sup>35</sup> Beckett, Samuel Murphy. New York,: Grove Press, 1957 p. 109

<sup>36</sup> Beckett, Samuel. p. 107

<sup>37</sup> Beckett, Samuel. p. 107

<sup>38</sup> Beckett, Samuel. p. 99

<sup>39</sup> Beckett, Samuel. p. 98

<sup>40</sup> Beckett, Samuel. p.7

<sup>41</sup> Beckett, Samuel. p. 19

## CHAPTER 2. THE SWITCH TO FRENCH IN 1945

This chapter will discuss Beckett's adoption of French as the language in which to compose first versions of his work. It will begin by considering Beckett's own comments about writing in French to interviewers, critics, and friends. Much can be gleaned from these insightful remarks about the author's appreciation of French and the qualities of the language that appealed to him. I will review Ruby Cohn's treatment of this topic in her book, Back to Beckett. Although Beckett was throughout his life notoriously guarded in his comments concerning his work, he did make several important remarks about this linguistic shift that may give some insight into his decision to switch from one language to the other for first versions of new works. In reviewing these remarks I shall argue that Beckett's choice of French represents a literary strategy with a definite purpose and tangible impact on his work.

The switch to French has often been viewed in conjunction with Beckett's decision to move to France. This chapter will explore this biographical aspect of Beckett's career and writing. Critics have often viewed Beckett's move from Ireland to France, both geographically and linguistically, as an "exile" or "self-imposed exile." Some critics focus on the similarities this exile shares with those of other literary figures, in particular James Joyce, and explore the literary motives behind it. A section will be devoted to understanding Beckett's relation to his homeland as well as his adopted domicile in France. The key to judging whether or not Beckett is truly an exile is by determining if his break with Ireland was definitive. I will review an essay that addresses Beckett's status as an exile by Helen Astbury.

Inevitably, critics point to Beckett's relationship with his mother as an explanation for the author's move to France. The critic Brian Fitch has maintained that Beckett quit Ireland, in part, to flee a smothering mother. A section will evaluate the nature of Beckett's relationship with his mother to determine if Fitch's neatly causal explanation has merit. This chapter will closely examine Beckett's relationship with his mother in light of the relatively new information presented in James Knowlson's biography, Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett. One very striking parallel between Beckett's fiction and his correspondence will be considered in an attempt to come to a more complete understanding of this relationship and how it may have affected his writing.

This chapter will include a close reading of Beckett's most famous play, Waiting for Godot. I chose this play not only because of the universal appeal it has demonstrated and the literary recognition it has received, but because it is an excellent example of Beckett's writing during the French period. This play displays all the most important characteristics that distinguish Beckett's writing during this time. The play also shares structural and thematic similarities with the later play, Happy Days, and can therefore be very useful in determining what features of Beckett's writing change and what features stay the same when he returns to English. I will highlight several aspects of the text, including the author's use of a bare prose to convey the protagonists' struggle with language, the view that Vladimir and Estragon represent the two halves of the Cartesian split between mind and body, and the relationships based on pairs that are presented in the play.

The following section will treat the end of the French period, which marked a series of creative difficulties for Beckett. I will consider Beckett's composition of La Dernière bande (Krapp's Last Tape) and his piece for mime, Acte sans paroles (Act Without Words) in this context. This is also a time distinguished by Beckett's rise to fame following the success of En attendant Godot. He became very busy with publishing, overseeing theatrical productions, and dealing with his newfound fame. These personal and professional responsibilities distracted him from his work and were something about which he complained to friends.

Beckett's French period is by far his most productive. During this time he produced a large number of new works while continuing to translate his previous writings. This level of output could not be maintained indefinitely and the new creative possibilities afforded Beckett by the French language eventually ran out. This may explain the creative difficulty Beckett met with at the end of the French period during his work on La Dernière Bande.

The final section of this chapter will conclude that French provided Beckett a vehicle for his art and allowed him to pursue his strategy of removing superfluous layers of his prose to arrive at a language that was both simple and universal. This effort, however, could not be maintained indefinitely and Beckett eventually came to an impasse in his creative efforts. Beckett's deliberate switch to French for the first version of new works for a ten-year period from 1945 to 1955 represents a key element of the writer's effort to dramatically alter his writing style with a strikingly austere language and imagery in order to convey universal themes with simple language.

## 2.1 Beckett's Famous Remarks about Writing in French/English

Beckett once said of English, "You couldn't help writing poetry in it." This section will consider this and some of Beckett's other remarks concerning his decision to begin composing new works solely in French beginning in 1945. This is a popular topic among scholars of his work, and several of Beckett's remarks in this regard have become quite famous. These remarks may provide the critic with some insight when seeking to explain this fundamental linguistic shift in Beckett's work. Here it is appropriate to quote Harry Cockerham, who wrote, "We are faced not with a writer who abandoned one language for another (a not-infrequent occurrence), but with the possibly unique phenomenon of one who, throughout his career, has divided his efforts and his interests between two languages."<sup>1</sup> One explanation for the switch to French holds that Beckett, as a student of French, was more conscious of his use of the language than a native speaker. As Harry Cockerham comments, "...what seems to attract [Beckett] about French is the very fact that it is less second nature to him than is English, that his relationship to it is different and makes him more able to manipulate it consciously..."<sup>2</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to catalog and analyze all of Beckett's remarks about language and what it means to write in French or English. Rather, I will consider several of Beckett's most frequently quoted comments on this subject in an effort to understand the author's insights into his own use of English and French. What emerges from these comments is a sense of what limitations he would face using his native English and what potential French promised.

In her book, Back to Beckett, Ruby Cohn takes up the topic of Beckett's use of language in a chapter entitled, "The Weakening Strength of French." In it, she briefly



notes the prolific period from 1946 to 1950 when Beckett switches to French and writes some 29 different works including stories, novels, poems, plays, texts, and art criticism. Cohn re-examines several of Beckett's comments on the shift to French. She makes the following list and uses her own translations from the French:

Pour faire remarquer moi. (To call attention to myself.) transition, 1948.

It was a different experience from writing in English. It was more exciting for me – writing in French. Schenker, 1956.

Parce qu'en français c'est plus facile d'écrire sans style. (In French it's easier to write without style.) Gessner, 1957.

I said that by writing in French [Beckett] was evading some part of himself. (*Pause.*) He said yes, there were a few things about himself he didn't like, that French had the right "weakening" effect. Blau, 1960.

When I asked [Beckett] in 1962 (as everyone seems to, sooner or later) why he switched from English to French, he replied that for him, an Irishman, French represented a form of weakness by comparison with his mother tongue. Besides, English because of its very richness holds out the temptation to rhetoric and virtuosity, which are merely words mirroring themselves complacently, narcissus-like. The relative asceticism of French seemed more appropriate to the expression of being, undeveloped, unsupported somewhere in the depths of the microcosm. Harvey, 1962.

To myself [Beckett said] that he was afraid of English "because you couldn't help writing poetry in it." Coe, 1964.

[Je] me remis à écrire – en français – avec le désir de m'appauvrir encore d'avantage. C'était ça le vrai mobile. (I took up writing again – in French – with the desire of impoverishing myself still further. That was the true purpose.) Janvier, 1968.”<sup>3</sup>

These remarks that Cohn lists in her book are very rich in their content. It is therefore unfortunate that she devotes only one sentence to their analysis. The first remark expresses Beckett's desire for recognition as a writer. This remark, however, remains suspect given Beckett's lifelong devotion to guarding his privacy and aversion to fame and celebrity. Beckett was notoriously reclusive, even viewing the 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature as a “catastrophe” and “disaster” because he knew the disruption it would cause him. Still, in spite of his humility, Knowlson detects a “concealed pride” in Beckett with regard to the work for which he made every effort and sacrifice.

The next two remarks indicate that Beckett found writing in French enjoyable because it was a different process from writing in English and because it gave him more control over his style. With French, Beckett could write in a radically different from style that he employed in English. The fourth remark furthers this idea by specifying that French had a “weakening” effect on him. French gave him control over otherwise unconscious elements of style that would have made his work recognizable.

The following comment is remarkable for several reasons. First, Beckett reiterates his view that French “weakens” his style. Second, he uses the term “mother tongue” rather than simply, “English.” This choice of words emphasizes the deeper, and consequently, more unconscious, relation one has to a mother language as opposed to an acquired one. Third, Beckett speaks of the richness of English and the temptations this quality affords. Unlike in the English works, Beckett avoids rhetoric and virtuosity in the

French period. It is ironic that Beckett should find refuge from the richness of English in the very language that is the source of that richness. Beckett's criticism of English words "mirroring themselves complacently, narcissus-like" and his praise of the "asceticism" of French is based on linguistic fact. English has more synonyms and consequently, a much larger vocabulary, than French. This is due, in part, to the Norman Invasion of England in 1066 that displaced the Anglo-Saxon language with the Anglo-Norman language among the ruling class of England. The French-based Anglo-Norman became the de facto language of record and therefore influenced the vocabulary of courts and government. It also became a language of prestige that showed class difference. Foodstuffs in English, for example, retain these differences today. Animals are called by their Germanic names such as pig, cow, and chicken, while the foods they provide are called by their French names, such as pork, beef, and poultry.

The next two remarks indicate that Beckett either knew or intuited that English had a larger vocabulary than French and therefore allowed for a greater variety of connotations and, in some cases, subtlety of meaning reminiscent of poetry. Beckett states at the end of the previous remark that French is more suited to his project of expressing being, undeveloped and unsupported. This is because French is not burdened with the excess connotations and meanings of English. French therefore may provide the bare language needed to express the fundamental characteristics of being.

## **2.2 Beckett's "Exile" to France, Translation, and Linguistic Exile**

It is quite common for Beckett scholars to describe Beckett's expatriation from Ireland and his time spent in France as exile. These remarks can be misleading because the term "exile" is defined first as a forced absence from one's home. This was certainly

not Beckett's case. The terms "French" and "exile" more often evoke writers from French-speaking former colonies of France. These writers from Africa, the Middle East, and Canada were forced, often for political reasons, to live and write in other countries.

Exile may also be defined, however, as a voluntary absence from one's country or home. In this case one actively chooses to leave or is driven to do so by internal motives. Whether involuntary or not, in literature, the exiled writer has come to imply one that is skeptical and cultured. In general terms, he is an outsider yet also intellectually rigorous and focused on his work. Scholars often compare Beckett and Joyce in this context, for both distrusted organized religion in Ireland, condemned the moralistic forces behind censorship, and composed highly intellectual works of literature set in Ireland while living in continental Europe. Beckett fits this definition of an exile but in order to understand his work better, one must go further and explore how, if Beckett's exile was a choice, his departure from Ireland affected his work. If the term "self-exile" is not an oxymoron, at least the emphasis shifts from the place of departure to the place of arrival. Perhaps Beckett is more concerned not with what he is leaving behind, but with what he is gaining by his move to France and his adoption of French.

As has been noted above, Beckett developed an interest in France and the French language as a young man. He pursued this interest at Trinity College, through an academic exchange at the Sorbonne, and eventually by moving to France and writing in French. These decisions were directly related to his intellectual and literary aspirations. Beckett not only found a rewarding pastime in French but also a means of achieving his literary goals. French came to serve him as a tool with which to better fashion his writing than he could with English.

It is important to emphasize the point that unlike some of his bilingual contemporaries, Beckett *chose* to exile himself to France and to work, at times exclusively, in French. The question may be asked, “How is Beckett’s exile unique, and what effect does it have on his overall project as a writer?” I will argue that, in addition to what has already been discussed above in the context of the author’s remarks about English and French, Beckett’s deliberate departure, both from homeland and native language, complements and reflects the underlying themes of alienation, decay, and helplessness inherent in the human condition found in his writing. Language and mankind’s dependence upon it are root concerns in much of Beckett’s work.

Thus, many of Beckett’s works may be viewed as dark comedies about man’s condition. His characters often witness worsening stages of decrepitude and disintegration. These characters use their imaginations to create fictive worlds and characters of their own that distract them from their suffering and allow them to pass the time. Given man’s great suffering, Beckett’s characters’ need to express is compulsive – ironically, in spite of the often-cited inadequacy of language to express. Language, however flawed it may be, is ultimately the only force that maintains life in Beckett’s work.

The Astbury essay mentioned in the first chapter is interesting for its author’s treatment of Beckett’s departure from Ireland. There, Helen Astbury argues that Beckett never made a definitive break with Ireland in spite of his choice to live in France and write in French. Astbury reviews the major works Beckett wrote before switching to French in order to measure to what extent Ireland was absent from Beckett’s work. Astbury claims Beckett was in “flight” from Ireland and seems to expect that this escape

should extend to his writing. Of course, she discovers that Beckett's work during this period is filled with Ireland and all things Irish. However, Beckett is far from nostalgic in the novels Dream of Fair to Middling Women and Murphy, which are largely set in Ireland. Instead, Beckett reserves his most stinging criticism and irony for what Astbury calls "...a small-minded, Catholic country..."<sup>4</sup>

When Astbury takes up Watt, the last novel Beckett wrote in English before switching to French, she observes that Beckett drafted the novel in France and that already the writing begins to show the characteristics that will distinguish Beckett's work in French. The author's scathing remarks about Ireland become much less frequent and disappear altogether after the switch to French. Astbury concludes that writing in English causes Beckett's hostility towards his homeland.

Astbury goes on to argue that the settings of Beckett's French works are at once anonymous and Irish. She comes to this dubious conclusion by considering the weather in these works and the names of people and places such as Molloy, Bally, Ballyba, Ballybaba. Anyone who has traveled in France knows the weather there can be equally miserable as in Ireland and with regard to the names, at least the latter two names seem influenced by French in the mode of Pays-Bas (Netherlands). Astbury poses the telling question, "It is as if Beckett could only stop criticizing Ireland by putting a greater and greater distance between himself and his country, and what greater distance for a writer than to abandon the language of that country?"<sup>5</sup> But Astbury has just argued that the writing remains Irish even during the French period and now she imagines Beckett is at the furthest point possible from his Irish culture. These two positions are simply incompatible.

Astbury goes on to note that Beckett's attitude toward Ireland changes for the better even during the French period. As proof of this she attributes a remark by the narrator of The Unnamable to Beckett himself, "je voulais mon pays." Even if one were to go along with such a flawed exercise in interpretation, nothing about this quote points to Beckett or Ireland. It is left intentionally vague and must be interpreted as such. When Astbury addresses Beckett's return to English with All that Fall, she notes that the autobiographical elements and nostalgia for Ireland that characterize the play are evident in the place names and character names of the work.

At the end of her essay, Astbury arrives at the paradoxical conclusion that Beckett's decision to leave Ireland and to write in French allowed him to write a quintessentially Irish theater.

Perhaps Astbury is missing the point, i.e., that Beckett is not fleeing Ireland, rather he is drawn to France. Undoubtedly, the early works of fiction are hostile toward Ireland but is there any reason to think Beckett would consider this a problem? And if so, would it be worth the immense effort of writing in another language to resolve? No, Beckett was drawn to France and to French for the new creative and stylistic possibilities the language afforded him. I disagree with Astbury that the French writing retains recognizably Irish settings, names, and themes. However, this is ultimately a question of motivation: is Beckett fleeing Ireland or embracing France? It is likely a combination of both but I would argue the latter provides a much more convincing explanation of Beckett's decision to write in French.

### 2.3 The Relationship with the Mother

Samuel Beckett was born on Good Friday, 13 April, 1906, to William and May Beckett at Cooldrinagh in Foxrock, County Dublin. Although the majority of critics agree that Beckett had strong bonds to both of his parents, most concentrate on the relationship he shared with his mother and speak of her enormous influence on him and his life. Critics develop explanations for Beckett's move to France and adoption of French based on the tempestuous side of his relationship with his mother. They cite emotional problems precipitated by his mother's controlling nature and open disappointment with her son.

On the other hand, though largely ignored by critics, images of Beckett's father do turn up in his writing and perhaps a thorough study of this relationship could reveal something about the literature. Beckett's own comments seem to discourage this line of inquiry. James Knowlson quotes Beckett from an interview conducted 9 July, 1989. Beckett then described his father as, "absolutely non-intellectual. He left school at fifteen. He was taken away. Couldn't stay. And was put to work. He had a big case of books, Dickens and Encyclopedias that he never opened. He used to read Edgar Wallace."<sup>6</sup> Critical work done thus far indicates that Beckett's intellectual interests, his dark humor and spells of melancholy and depression link him more strongly with his mother than his father.

In particular, Samuel Beckett's strained relationship with his mother is very often brought up in conjunction with his departure from Ireland. When commenting on Beckett's switch to French, Brian Fitch writes, "And here a further factor undoubtedly enters into consideration in Beckett's case: his unceasing efforts to put as much distance



as possible between himself and his native land in general and his mother in particular – the place and occasion, so to speak, of his birth.” According to this view, it would seem Beckett chose to escape his mother with a geographic and linguistic departure.

Fitch’s explanation of Beckett’s departure from Ireland and his adoption of French is not entirely convincing if compared with the account one finds in James Knowlson’s biography, Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett. Although Knowlson never addresses this topic directly, a clear picture of Beckett’s relationship with his mother can be gleaned from Knowlson’s study. He demonstrates convincingly that Beckett’s relationship with his mother was very close from early on. In this context, Knowlson remarks on Beckett’s birth and the author’s lifelong claim to have prenatal memories.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to the common view of the womb as a safe haven Beckett most often depicts it as a painful prison. In one particular poem Beckett describes his birth thus, “where I was born with a pop with the green of the larches /... oh the larches the pain drawn like a cork.”<sup>8</sup> This pain does not end with the birth but signals only the beginning of a life of suffering, a life of dying, and a life of unending pain. In this light, one sees that Beckett views all births, not just his own, as heralding a life of suffering and slow death and therefore his mother is no more to blame than any other woman who gives birth. Furthermore, Fitch is wrong to believe that Beckett seeks to put as much distance between himself and his birth as possible because despite its horror; this is an idea that fascinated Beckett and recurs again and again in his work. One well-known example which will be discussed further below is the description of the birth astride a grave in En Attendant Godot.

If one goes back further in time to compare descriptions of both Beckett and his mother's childhood, one sees similarities in their personalities, particularly stubbornness and independence. As a child, May Beckett was educated at the Moravian Mission School in Ballymena and demonstrated what Knowlson calls a "rebellious nature and stubborn streak of independence."<sup>9</sup> She was considered by all to be a difficult student and was once sent home for talking to a boy over the school wall. In spite of this early rebelliousness against an oppressively authoritarian environment, Knowlson points out that she became extremely strict and demanding herself as she grew older. People who knew her described her as having an imposing bearing and forceful personality. She was not, however, without a sense of humor. Knowlson points out her sense of the ridiculous and acerbic wit. She was above all a practical woman and ran the family home of Cooldrinagh efficiently and rigidly. She was known for her fierce temper but also showed kindness and generosity to those around her. This side of her personality was perhaps driven in part by an unyielding code of conduct and sense of decorum.

The young Beckett was engaged in an almost constant battle of wills with his mother and was forced to yield only under threats or punishment. One example of Beckett's early agoraphobia is recounted by Knowlson, "He made dreadful scenes, for instance, when he was forced to go to children's parties (which he loathed), trying to escape by hiding in the outbuildings or shutting himself in his room. When found and made to go, he would sulk and speak to nobody."<sup>10</sup> This is a very early example both of his independence and struggle with his strict mother as well as his lifelong difficulty with social situations and interaction with people.

Knowlson sums up well the relationship Beckett was to have with his mother throughout childhood and young adulthood when he writes, “Everyone who knew them [Beckett and his mother] spoke of the fierce bond of affection that seemed to bind them together, but also of the stormy conflicts that would blow up between them, sometimes, apparently, over nothing at all.”<sup>11</sup> The problem was not that they disliked each other, but rather that they had diametrically opposed views of how Beckett should lead his life. Their love for one another was very strong, which made their disagreements all the more painful because in addition to having to bear his mother’s disappointment, Beckett was pained by the loss of her affection.

Beckett’s mother wanted her son to take a job, settle down, and lead a respectable life in Foxrock. While not outwardly hostile to her son’s writing, she largely ignored it, even when Beckett had succeeded in publishing some of his writing. The idea of an ordinary job was absolute anathema to Beckett, yet his affection for his mother enabled him to withstand her moral condemnation and pressure on him. Knowlson writes in his biography that in the mid 1930s, “He [Beckett] thought that his mother was keeping him deliberately short of money, so that he would be obliged to stay and obtain gainful employment.”<sup>12</sup> Even when he had succeeded in publishing “Echo’s Bones” and gave his mother three copies, there was only “revolted silence” in return. Eventually, however, Beckett did leave, first to Germany in 1936 and then more permanently to France in 1937. These feelings of resentment for Beckett must have endured for some time because he continued to receive a small amount of money to live on from his mother until the success of Waiting for Godot gave him financial security in the early 1950s.

In spite of the distance from France, Beckett returned home every year to spend at least one month with his mother. And he was there when she finally succumbed after a long battle with Parkinson's disease. Beckett's mother died on August 25, 1950, and Beckett was devastated by her loss. He felt guilty for not being the son she had wanted and was particularly traumatized by her passing because their relationship had been so close. Knowlson writes of Beckett's relationship with his mother, "For although he had been unable to live with her, he had also been unable to sever their emotional ties."<sup>13</sup>

Knowlson also writes of the interviews he conducted with Beckett just before the author's death in 1989: "In the final months of his life, Beckett's feelings of love for his mother and remorse at having, as he saw it, let her down so frequently, struck me as still intense, almost volcanic. It was virtually the only 'no-go' area in our conversations. Whenever the subject arose, it was clear that it was too painful, even unbearable, for him to discuss."<sup>14</sup> Knowlson goes on to say that this did not preclude Beckett from having dealt with these issues in his writing.

The critic Lawrence Graver, in his essay, "Homage to the Dark Lady Ill Seen Ill Said," draws a parallel between the female protagonist of Ill Seen Ill Said with Beckett's mother. He also notes several other works that may draw on the image of May Beckett in their main characters, including, Footfalls, Rockaby, and Company. What Graver points to as the salient feature of all these women is that they are never the object of irony. He singles out the protagonists of All that Fall, and Happy Days, the first fully developed female characters in Beckett's work but also as essentially comic characters because of their rhetorical extravagance.

Nonetheless, Maddy Rooney from All that Fall and Winnie from Happy Days are striking women who only appear in Beckett's fiction after the death of his mother. While the later allusions to her become more recognizable, their germ can be found in these first works from the return to English.

Graver introduces Melanie Klein's theory of artistic creation to strengthen his argument that images of May Beckett appear in the writer's work. He quotes Klein, who claims the writer is driven by the "desire to rediscover the mother of the early days, whom [he] has lost actually or in [his] feelings."<sup>15</sup> This image also appears in Roland Barthes' book, The Pleasure of the Text, where the writer is described as, "someone who plays with his mother's body... in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it, to take it to the limit of what can be known about the body."<sup>16</sup> Graver also has recourse to the feminist writer Susan Rubin Suleiman, who comments on the artist and the child in her essay, "Writing and Motherhood," when she says, "In both cases, the mother is the essential but silent Other, the mirror in whom the child searches for his own reflection, the body he seeks to appropriate, the thing he loses or destroys again and again, and seeks to recreate."<sup>17</sup>

## **2.4 Reading of En attendant Godot: Plot Structure, Language, and Gender**

This section will be devoted to a careful consideration of Beckett's play En attendant Godot that provides specific examples to support the argument put forward previously, namely, that this play serves as an excellent example of Beckett's use of French to affect his writing style. This play also serves well for an examination of themes of exile, gender attitudes, and a particular plot structure that will appear again in later Beckett plays.

Beckett originally wrote En attendant Godot in 1948 and the play had its premiere at the left bank Théâtre de Babylone in Paris. It was an immediate *succès de scandale* and word spread quickly among the Parisian public. The play not only saved the Théâtre de Babylone from bankruptcy but it irrevocably launched Beckett to international fame and notoriety.

The spartan setting of the play, a country road in the evening, immediately distinguishes this work from Beckett's earlier writing for its lack of a precise location. This lack is the first demonstration of the theme of exile that is developed in the play. The action takes place in a no man's land where people are strangely cut off from their counterparts and any semblance of a normal existence. In contrast, Beckett's earlier works have definite geographic locations. For example, the second line of Murphy informs the reader that the setting is West Brompton and More Pricks than Kicks is set in Dublin.

The play begins with Estragon struggling unsuccessfully to pull off his boot. The effort is physically exhausting and so between attempts, he sits panting. During one of these breaks Vladimir enters and says, "Nothing to be done." (Rien à faire.) This striking opening line of the play, in addition to being a remark on the boot, neatly condenses the existential theme of the play, i.e., the despair and hopelessness provoked by intense boredom. As the play moves forward, the characters will struggle to pass the time and fend off boredom and thoughts of suicide.

Estragon informs Vladimir that he has spent the night in a ditch and been beaten by unknown assailants, as usual. The two remark on their long friendship and Vladimir makes the first of several references to suicide when he says they should have been

among the first to jump off the Eiffel Tower. Estragon finally succeeds in removing his boot and, at the same time, Vladimir removes his hat. Each man carefully examines his particular piece of garb before speaking again. This scene may indicate that the two characters represent each half of the Cartesian division of man between mind and body. Beckett's interest in Descartes dates from his earliest writing, particularly, his prize-winning poem, "Whoroscope." The hat's association with the head and therefore the intellect indicates Vladimir will have intellectual abilities. And the shoe's association with the foot, farthest part of the body from the head, points to a corporeal role for Estragon. This distinction is reinforced by Vladimir's ability to remember past events, an ability Estragon does not share, and Estragon's constant complaints of physical pain. Also, at the end of Act I, Lucky will need his hat before he can "think."

Next, the two bums discuss the two thieves crucified at the same time as Jesus:

Vladimir. – Ah oui, j'y suis, cette histoire de larrons.

Tu t'en souviens?

Estragon. – Non.

Vladimir. – Tu veux que je te la raconte?

Estragon. – Non.

Vladimir. – Ça passera le temps. (*Un temps.*)

C'étaient deux voleurs, crucifiés en même temps  
que le Sauveur. On...

Estragon. – Le quoi?

Vladimir. – Le Sauveur. Deux voleurs. On dit que  
l'un fut sauvé et l'autre... (*il cherche le contraire  
de sauvé*) ...damné.

(En attendant Godot p.14)

Vladimir. – Ah yes, the two thieves. Do you  
remember the story?

Estragon. – No.

Vladimir. – Shall I tell it to you?

Estragon. – No.

Vladimir. – It'll pass the time. (*Pause.*) Two thieves,  
crucified at the same time as our Savior. One—

Estragon. – Our what?

Vladimir. – Our Savior. Two thieves. One is  
supposed to have been saved and the other . . . (*he*  
*searches for the contrary of saved*) . . . damned.  
(Waiting for Godot p. 16)

This section of dialogue is an excellent example of the simplicity of language Beckett achieves with French. Here the halting style of the short declarative sentences, sometimes even lacking verbs, suggests the breakdown of language and the main characters' struggle to express themselves. After some effort to recall, Vladimir remembers the story and offers to recount it to Estragon. The latter neither remembers it nor wishes to hear it and answers his friend's questions with a blunt "no." However, when Vladimir explains that his story will pass the time, Estragon ceases to protest. This is because Estragon shares his companion's desire to fend off the intense boredom with which they are afflicted.

Upon hearing the story, Estragon immediately has problems understanding what he is being told. He apparently does not hear or does not understand the words, "le Sauveur" (the Saviour). Vladimir also has trouble with language as he struggles to find the antonym of saved. These details highlight Beckett's preoccupation with language and parallel his own use of French to simplify and pare down his writing. When Estragon cannot understand what he is being told, Vladimir does away with extraneous elements, verbs included, to reduce the story to its essential elements: the savior and two thieves, just as Beckett writes in French to avoid the poetry and potential distractions of his mother tongue. Here is also evidence of linguistic exile because their ties to one another through language are at risk. Both characters struggle to express themselves in language and therefore struggle to communicate with each other.



This difficulty highlights the distance between two otherwise very close companions. One must also point out the obvious irony of the word Estragon does not understand: savior. The levels of meaning here are many and varied. On the most superficial level, the reader may interpret Godot as a divine figure and this episode would serve to further emphasize his mystery and absence. On another level, this denial of the word “savior” may indicate just the opposite, that the subject of the play is not God, but man. According to the latter interpretation, Vladimir and Estragon become the focus of the play. Indeed it is the drudgery of their existence and how they cope with this situation that is most important.

A brief caveat before continuing: many critics have tackled the complex philosophical underpinnings of Beckett’s work. It is a complex subject that has fueled debate since before Beckett won the Nobel Prize in 1969. However, for the sake of brevity, I must limit my treatment of philosophy in the present study to brief remarks on Descartes, Geulincx, and Malebranche.<sup>18</sup>

René Descartes, to sum up briefly, pursued a system of radical doubt of his senses and the material things they perceived. He concluded that one could be sure only of the mind’s existence. He wrote, “Although the things I perceive and imagine are perhaps nothing at all outside me and in themselves, I am nevertheless assured that those modes of thought, certainly reside in and are found in me...”<sup>19</sup> This line of thought leads directly to Descartes’ famous axiom, “Cogito, ergo sum” (I think, therefore I am) in his work, Discourse on Method. Ultimately, the belief that the true self is to be found in the mind leads to a mind/body dualism. For Descartes’ followers, these ideas promoted introspection and study of the mind from within since the senses were liable to error.

Pattie comments, “The parallels between this practice and Beckett’s writing were, for his early critics, irresistible.”<sup>20</sup> While Descartes did not posit a total split between mind and body, two of his followers, Arnold Geulincx and Nicolas Malebranche, did. Beckett makes repeated references to all three philosophers in his work. Most prominently, Beckett quoted Geulincx’s famous Latin phrase in a letter to Sighle Kennedy, “ubi nihil valis, ubi nihil velis,” “Where I am worth nothing, I should want nothing.”<sup>21</sup>

Pattie emphasizes the striking difference between these philosophers’ worldview and Beckett’s work: “the absence of a God [in Beckett] converted the quietly optimistic philosophy of Descartes into a fundamentally pessimistic view of the world.”<sup>22</sup> This is because of the resulting chaos when the self is completely cut off from the external world. The above quotation highlights this lack of a God and the breakdown of language when Estragon does not comprehend the word “savior.”

Vladimir and Estragon continue their debate about the two thieves, and the former wonders aloud why only one version of the story has survived. He is genuinely perplexed but Estragon dismisses the whole affair with a simple, “People are bloody ignorant apes.” (16) (*Les gens sont des cons*). Vladimir spits on the ground in disgust. Estragon looks at his surroundings for a few moments and says, “Endroit délicieux.” (16) (*Charming spot*). These comments are good examples of the humor in Beckett that so often goes overlooked. But this whole episode serves several purposes. First, it reinforces the distinction already noted between the intellectual Vladimir and the corporeal Estragon. Vladimir knows the story and its historical context and puzzles over its outcome. Estragon values the debate only as a distraction from the boredom. Second, it adds to the religious imagery that permeates the play but casts this imagery in historical

terms. This creates the unexpected and jarring situation where two tramps assume the roles of Bible scholars. This creates a dramatic tension that builds each time the spectator's expectations are frustrated. The ultimate frustration, of course, is the anti-climactic ending of the play.

Their conversation turns, interestingly, to English when Estragon comments on the English pronunciation of the word "calm" and offers to tell a joke about an Englishman who goes to a whorehouse. Here Beckett pokes fun at his native English and the cultural stereotype of the unemotional English from within the French language. ("Estragon – Les anglais disent câââm. Ce sont des gens câââms.") (20) (Estragon – Calm . . . calm . . . The English say cawm). This is also the first of two oblique references to women. In this case, they are prostitutes in a dirty joke.

Estragon suggests they hang themselves to pass the time. The matter is quickly decided when Vladimir remarks that hanging will give them erections and cause them to ejaculate. They have second thoughts when they examine the tree. Estragon sees a potential problem of which Vladimir is unaware, however, and when he tries to explain the dilemma, language nearly fails him. He therefore simplifies his language by doing away with grammar and verb conjugations to state his case: "Estragon (*avec effort*). – Gogo léger – branche pas casser – Gogo mort. Didi lourd – branche casser – Didi seul..." (22) (*with effort*). Gogo light—bough not break—Gogo dead. Didi heavy—bough break—Didi alone. Whereas—). This episode is remarkable for its unexpected justification of suicide: an erection and an ejaculation. Suicide will also pass the time but it does not appeal to Estragon and Vladimir as the ultimate solution to their boredom as

one might expect. Once again, the characters' need for one another is highlighted when it becomes clear they fear solitude more than death.

Estragon asks Vladimir for a carrot. The latter searches a long time and removes all sorts of odds and ends from his pocket before giving his friend a turnip. When Estragon remarks the error, Vladimir searches again and eventually finds a carrot. This section recalls the opening scene of the play when Estragon tries to remove his boot. In both instances the characters use physical objects as a means to fill both physical and temporal space. Vladimir is aware of this, and the last thing he tells Estragon when he gives him the carrot is, "Fais la durer, il n'y en a plus." (26) (Make it last, that's the end of them). Here, Beckett's characters are making something out of nothing. They are manipulating physical objects to create action that fends off boredom. They are filling physical space with objects and temporal space with activity. It does not matter the outcome of the activity, innocuous (carrot) or lethal (hanging), as long as it passes the time. When this is compared with their other efforts in the same regard, an interesting conclusion may be drawn. For example, their cavalier attitude toward suicide may be contrasted with their manipulation and consumption of the carrot. Both acts are intended to pass time and are therefore of equal importance. One may ask if life has lost value or if the carrot and by extension the ordinary objects of daily life have taken on a greater significance. These objects, so abundant in daily life yet never considered very important, often figure in Beckett's theater. Beckett's people use these objects as a last resort to fend off boredom and affirm their very existence.

Estragon asks if the two are "liés" ("tied"):

Estragon (*mâche, avale*) – Je demande si on est liés.  
Vladimir – Liés?

Estragon – Li-és.  
Vladimir – Comment, liés?  
Estragon – Pieds et poings.  
Vladimir – Mais à qui, par qui?  
Estragon – A ton bonhomme.  
Vladimir – A Godot? Liés à Godot? Quelle idée? Jamais de la vie! (*Un temps.*) Pas encore. (*Il ne fait pas la liaison.*)

(Godot, 27)

Estragon – (*chews, swallows*). – I'm asking you if we're tied.  
Vladimir – Tied?  
Estragon – Ti-ed.  
Vladimir – How do you mean tied?  
Estragon – Down.  
Vladimir – But to whom? By whom?  
Estragon – To your man.  
Vladimir – To Godot? Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it.  
(*Pause.*) For the moment.

(Godot, 25)

This exchange is important for the multiple meanings the word “tied” allows. Vladimir asks Estragon what he means and the latter replies “down” literally, “hands and feet.” This reference to physical restraint is in keeping with Estragon’s character thus far. However, Vladimir interprets this question in a more abstract sense when he asks, “But to whom, by whom?” Estragon picks up the abstract sense of the word and says, “To your man.” Vladimir is at first shocked by this proposition and is adamantly opposed to the idea. However, some doubt creeps in when he says, “For the moment.”

This exchange is remarkable because all the various meanings of the word “tied” are valid to some extent. The two protagonists are dependent upon one another for survival and therefore tied. The two are bound by their appointment to Godot and therefore tied to him. By extension they are physically bound to the location, though no

ropes or chains bind them. Shortly, a character who is physically bound will appear when Pozzo and Lucky arrive.

When Estragon finishes his carrot, he says, “C’est curieux, plus on va, moins c’est bon.” (27) (Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets.) This line is another example of Beckett’s humor because the French version lacks the verb “eat” (more literally, “the further you go the worse it gets”) and surely some must have said the same about this play which has frustrated so many spectators. More seriously, this comment reflects the pair’s situation for the same could be said about their lives. Vladimir claims to have the opposite view, and the two comment on their different temperaments. At the end of this exchange, Estragon says, “Rien à faire” (28) (“Nothing to be done.”) echoing the same phrase that opened the play. This symmetry indicates the closing of the first movement of Act I.

The second movement begins with Estragon’s asking Vladimir if he wants to finish *it* (“Veux-tu la finir?”), referring to the carrot, just before they are frightened by a loud noise. This line is an enjambement that carries over an object from the first movement to begin the second. The line is also notable because it elicits the idea of a conclusion in a play that often lacks finishing or resolution in the traditional sense. This idea will also close the movement with a symmetry parallel to that of the first movement, as will be noted below.

Beckett is known for the colorful, sometimes scatological, names he gives to his characters and places. Some examples are Watt (What), Krapp, (crap) and the town of Turdy. The Italian language and in particular, Dante, is influential on much of Beckett’s

writing. For that reason, some have seen a connection between Pozzo and *pazzo*, Italian for crazy. There is also obvious irony in naming an abused servant/slave Lucky.

The pair also serves to mirror Vladimir and Estragon in several ways. First, they form a couple wherein each is dependent on the other. Second, physical/animal characteristics distinguish one and intellectual abilities characterize the other. Lucky recalls a beast of burden as he carries his heavy load, never putting anything down to rest. Also, Pozzo tells Vladimir and Estragon to watch out because he is mean with strangers, much as one would warn strangers of a dog that bites. Furthermore, Lucky never speaks until the end of Act I when Pozzo orders him to “think.” Lucky is dehumanized because he is deprived of speech and, seemingly, thought – qualities that separate man from beast – until Pozzo gives the order. The rope around Lucky’s neck also demonstrates Pozzo’s complete control over him and simultaneously recalls the earlier discussion of hanging.

Pozzo introduces himself, yet Vladimir and Estragon mistake him for Godot. Pozzo’s pride is hurt at the error and Vladimir and Estragon apologize for never having heard of him. Estragon says, “Nous ne sommes pas d’ici, monsieur.” (30) (“We’re not from these parts, Sir.”) This comment renders the theme of exile explicit. Until this point various forms of exile, e.g., physical and mental, have only been implied by the barren setting and the bizarre circumstances of the two main characters. Pozzo then asks who Godot is, and it becomes clear that Vladimir and Estragon have only a vague notion themselves. They say he is an acquaintance, that they hardly know him and they admit that they would not be able to recognize him. This episode is important because it casts doubt on what, until this point, has been the only certainty of the play: that Estragon and

Vladimir are waiting for Godot. That they are waiting for him implies that they know him or have some business with him, both of which are false suppositions.

Pozzo changes the subject and occupies himself with stirring Lucky. At this point he remarks that whenever Lucky falls down, he falls asleep. This bothers Pozzo just as Vladimir is troubled when Estragon falls asleep. One may question his motive but judging from the other similarities between the two couples, it is reasonable to suggest that he also fears abandonment. However, the analogy is not perfect for there is clearly a distance in status between Pozzo and Lucky that does not separate Vladimir and Estragon. Pozzo comments that Vladimir and Estragon are “human beings,” of the same “species” as he. He also says that he cannot deprive himself for too long of the company of his likenesses (*semblables*). This indicates that Lucky does not provide the same company and therefore is inferior to the other three men.

Pozzo decides to take the opportunity to spend some time with his newfound companions. Pozzo sits down to eat and when he has finished his meal and begins to smoke. He stretches his legs and says, “Ah! ça va mieux.” (36) (“Ah! That's better.”) Estragon asks Pozzo for his discarded chicken bones and the latter responds that he must ask Lucky, as the bones technically belong to him. Estragon asks Lucky for the bones and is met with silence. Pozzo pushes Lucky to reply, yelling, “Answer pig!” (36) but Lucky remains silent and Pozzo gives Estragon permission to take the bones.

At this point Vladimir becomes very agitated and expresses his disgust with Pozzo's inhumane treatment of Lucky. He says it is wrong to treat another “human being” this way. Estragon supports his friend and says Lucky's treatment is a “scandal.” At this point the reader or spectator might expect a response from Pozzo that would



clarify his view of Lucky. Instead, he answers indirectly by claiming they are too hard on him (*sévères*) and then he asks how old they are. This is the only clue given to their age. He asks if they are “sixty” or “seventy.” (37) However, this may or may not be a reliable indication of their age. Pozzo changes the subject and decides to leave. He has second thoughts and thinks it is a good idea to stay and smoke his pipe one more time. Estragon finishes sucking the last bone and says, “Ah! ça va mieux.” (38) (“Ah! That's better.”) This line repeats exactly what Pozzo said when he sat down to smoke his pipe the first time and creates more symmetry in the play. It indicates that Estragon is easily impressionable and mimics those around him. Perhaps this is because of his diminished mental ability.

The subject quickly changes again when Estragon asks why Lucky does not put his bags down when he is standing still. By the time Pozzo realizes he is being asked a question, Estragon has forgotten what he wants to ask. Both Vladimir and Pozzo remind him. Pozzo makes elaborate preparations to speak, as if he were delivering an important speech and not answering a simple question about his servant. He asks several times for everyone's attention and then produces throat spray from his pocket which he uses and spits and repeats. When he is finally ready to speak, he has forgotten the question.

As the three characters struggle unsuccessfully to communicate in this exchange, language breaks down and once again Estragon pares down his language and makes a supreme effort to communicate with Pozzo: “Estragon – (*avec force*). – Bagages! (*Il pointe son doigt vers Lucky.*) Pourquoi? Toujours tenir. (*Il fait celui qui ploie, en haletant.*) Jamais déposer. (*Il ouvre les mains, se redresse avec soulagement.*) Pourquoi ? (41) (“Estragon – (*forcibly*). Bags. (*He points at Lucky.*) Why? Always hold.

*(He sags, panting.)* Never put down. *(He opens his hands, straightens up with relief.)* Why?") Here, as in the previous example, Estragon does away with superfluous words, even conjugations, to arrive at the most basic form of his question. This time, however, he also mimes the action to make his meaning clear. His effort is successful and Pozzo understands. Beckett is once again testing the limits of language.

Pozzo tells Vladimir and Estragon that Lucky seeks to impress his master and inspire pity in him so that he will keep him. Lucky fears separation and evidently Pozzo does not share this fear. He says that their roles could have been reversed, that only chance is responsible for their situation. Of course, this line foreshadows the reversal that will take place in the second act. Pozzo explains that he is on his way to the Saint-Sauveur market ("the fair" in the English version, literally, "Holy Saviour" market) to sell his servant. Lucky begins to cry, and Pozzo tells Vladimir to wipe away his tears so he will feel less abandoned. When Vladimir approaches Lucky to wipe his tears, the latter gives him a sharp kick in the shin. Pozzo unsympathetically says he already warned Estragon that Lucky did not like strangers. Vladimir examines Estragon's bleeding leg and Pozzo remarks that Lucky has stopped crying. He then expounds a karma-type theory whereby all actions are continually passed from one person to another. Lucky stopped crying when Estragon began. Pozzo concludes that the world is no worse nor any better than in the past. He says he learned these things from Lucky. In fact, he credits Lucky with having given him all the culture, refinement, and ability to reason that he possesses. This is another example of the pairs of opposites that characterize this section, e.g., slave/master, speech/silence, and fidelity/betrayal. Yet when Vladimir questions Pozzo's decision to sell his servant, the latter becomes very agitated and

screams he can no longer tolerate Lucky. Vladimir and Estragon are easily swayed to his point of view and begin to question Lucky's treatment of his master. Pozzo finally gains control of his emotions and disavows what he has just said, along with any perceived weakness.

At this point Vladimir and Estragon have an exchange that could easily take place between two spectators in the audience.

Vladimir – Charmante soirée.  
Estragon – Inoubliable.  
Vladimir – Et ce n'est pas fini.  
Estragon – On dirait que non.  
Vladimir – Ça ne fait que commencer.  
Estragon – C'est terrible.  
Vladimir – On se croirait au spectacle.  
Estragon – Au cirque.  
Vladimir – Au music-hall.  
Estragon – Au cirque.

(Godot 47-48)

Vladimir – Charming evening we're having.  
Estragon – Unforgettable.  
Vladimir – And it's not over.  
Estragon – Apparently not.  
Vladimir – It's only beginning.  
Estragon – It's awful.  
Vladimir – Worse than the pantomime.  
Estragon – The circus.  
Vladimir – The music-hall.  
Estragon – The circus.

(Godot 46)

The spectator or reader first remarks the humor and light tone of this exchange. Vladimir and Estragon speak in the quaint formal register one might expect to hear at the theater or opera. This is enormously ironic and comic because it is so unexpected from these two tramps. The play within a play quality that has already been suggested is rendered explicit when Vladimir says he feels like he is at the theater. The adjectives

they choose to describe it could describe Godot equally well. This mirroring effect creates an infinite regress that is appropriate in a play that explores themes of time, memory, and vastness. The juxtaposition of formal language in an utterly informal situation is continued when Pozzo asks Estragon for help sitting down. The former simply asks Estragon to request that he sit down. Estragon complies but Pozzo still does not sit. He explains that Estragon has to insist a little. Estragon requests him to sit again, this time claiming he will get sick if he does not. This strategy works and Pozzo sits. It is worth noting that in this case one character is able to assist another with a physical problem solely through the use of language.

When Pozzo looks at his watch, Vladimir remarks that time has stopped. This along with his longing for the day to end and night to begin reinforces the slowness that marks the entire play.

Pozzo asks his companions if they know what makes dusk special in the area. He proceeds to deliver an overly dramatic speech in which he compares night to a galloping horse that will throw itself on them when they least expect it. Pozzo closes his speech with the memorable phrase, “C’est comme ça que ça se passe sur cette putain de terre.” (52) (“That’s how it is on this bitch of an earth.”) Night, of course, is a common metaphor for death in literature, and this is no exception. The obvious allegory here is that of a man’s entire life. It begins with great energy and light but eventually fades as night approaches. Evening is associated with calm and softness but night is seemingly to be feared. The horse Pozzo employs to anthropomorphize night recalls the four horsemen of the Apocalypse: war, famine, pestilence, and death. This speech also furthers the themes of waiting and the passage of time as Estragon and Vladimir remark

that all one can do is wait, an activity with which they are very familiar. This section also continues the play within a play theme when Pozzo asks his “audience” how he performed. Both Vladimir and Estragon compliment Pozzo. The latter, however, admits that he weakened a little at the end of his monologue and blames his faulty memory. This demonstrates that Pozzo also struggles to remember past events, as do his two interlocutors. Then Estragon says, “En attendant, il ne se passe rien.” (53) (“In the meantime, nothing happens.”) This line has several important levels of meaning. First, on the most basic level, it states a fact: nothing is happening. However, upon closer examination the line is something of a conundrum because of its subjectivity. No action is driving the plot forward, yet the simple passage of time could be considered an action. Second, this line recalls the title of the play and in so doing suggests it be interpreted in the overall context of the whole play. In this sense, the line serves to reinforce the atmosphere of stagnation at this point in the play while simultaneously summing it up on a larger level. Third, this line recalls the “rien” that begins Act I and suggests a deeper organizational structure to the play than is immediately evident.

Pozzo fears his companions are bored with him, so he suggests that Lucky entertain them by dancing and thinking. The dance he performs is unimpressive but his “thinking” is quite remarkable. Lucky begins his monologue in the middle of a thought with the words, “D’autre part” (59) (“On the other hand”) Pozzo interrupts him and orders him to take several steps back and start over. Lucky complies and begins with a phrase that might normally be found at the beginning of a sentence, “Etant donné” – “Given the” (59) This implies that for Lucky thought and speech are influenced by physical space and location.

Lucky delivers a long monologue that parodies academic discourse and mixes erudite language with mundane vocabulary and made-up words. Lucky cites two scholars with the names Poinçon and Wattman. The latter name may be split into two parts, Watt and man. The former is of course the main character in Beckett's eponymous novel and the second another marker of the absence of women in this play. Beckett also makes puns on the names of other scholars: Testu and Conard, along with Fartov and Belcher. The former are French puns and the latter English. Lucky's logorrhea is characterized by a tendency toward poetry and assonance and by the inability to finish a thought or idea. It is no coincidence that the last word Lucky utters is "inachevés" ("unfinished"). Lucky stops speaking only when Vladimir snatches his hat away. He collapses, and once again, a certain physical aspect characterizes Lucky's thought. The hat seems to turn his thought on and off just as his physical position dictates where he will pick up his speech. And when he is done thinking, he is physically exhausted to the point that the others must help him to stand again. And then, Lucky is only able to stand when he holds his bags.

Lucky's monologue touches on many of the same ideas present earlier in the play, such as God, hell, philosophy, time, ending, and abandonment. The key element here, however, is that he is never able to follow these ideas through to a conclusion. He is interrupted with other thoughts or by language itself with stutters, rhymes and repetition.

At this point in the text, a small boy appears with a message from Godot. Estragon questions the boy aggressively, angered by his late arrival. In this exchange, Estragon is looking to the boy to verify his own conception of the present and to reinforce his memory. Of course, he fails and loses his temper. Vladimir tries to console him by

saying, “La mémoire nous joue de ces tours.” (70) (“Extraordinary the tricks that memory plays!”)

Vladimir asks the boy if he has seen him before, if he knows him and if he has ever come there before. The boy answers “no” and says it is the first time he has come to deliver a message from Godot. Clearly, Vladimir, like Estragon before him, is attempting to root his experience in time, to locate a temporal landmark with which to orient himself. He fails, as does Estragon.

When Vladimir sends him away, the boy asks what he should say to Godot. Vladimir replies that he should tell him he has seen Vladimir and Estragon. Vladimir then revealingly asks the boy, “You have seen us, right?” It is as if Vladimir is again seeking confirmation not only of his perception but Vladimir also seeks existential confirmation of his being from the boy.

Night falls quickly and the two turn to conversation to pass the time. Three important remarks are made before the act ends. First, Estragon compares himself to Jesus for being barefoot. When Vladimir objects, he says he has compared himself to Jesus his entire life and that at that time one could easily end up crucified. This reference to Jesus and the crucifixion continues the religious themes begun earlier. However, in this case there is a shift from the thieves crucified with Jesus to Jesus himself. This intensifies the religious level of meaning of the play and suggests a quasi-religious motive for the action of the play. Second, Estragon looks at the tree and says he is sorry that they do not have some rope. This reference to their earlier discussion of hanging themselves continues the theme of suicide. Estragon goes further by describing an attempt at suicide when he jumped in the Durance River. Ironically, this name seems

related to duration. If one conceives of time as a river, the irony deepens. Estragon attempts to escape time and boredom by throwing himself headlong into the river of time called Duration. But he did not succeed, Vladimir rescued him. Third, the act closes with Vladimir saying “Allons-y.” (75) (“Let’s go.”) The text, however, indicates that they do not move. This comment is important because it will be repeated by Estragon at the end of the second act, thereby creating an element of circularity in the play. The following note also demonstrates once again the inertia that holds both characters in place and ties them together. More than once they show a desire to separate or leave this place together, yet they are incapable.

The second act begins, as the notes indicate, the next day in the same location. Estragon and Vladimir’s boots and hat are present. These details serve as reminders of the main characters’ defining traits as presented in the first act. Vladimir enters and observes the tree. This carryover from the first act has changed – several leaves have sprouted. This suggests the passage of more time than the text explicitly indicates and lends a universal quality to the actions and themes of the play. The meaning of the leaves is open to interpretation but may indicate seasonal change. If this is the case, the arrival of spring might imply the renewal phase of the cycle of life and by extension an optimism that was absent in the first act.

Vladimir sings a song and for the first time seems capable of finishing a thought or idea without difficulty. Music and musicality are almost always central concerns in Beckett’s writing and En attendant Godot is no exception. It is perhaps significant that Vladimir is able to sing a song successfully. The song itself is the story of a dog that steals a sausage and is consequently caught and chopped to bits by the butcher. Other



dogs bury the first dog at the foot of a cross that recounts his fate. This leads to a repetition of the story and therefore the song repeats endlessly. This story creates a second infinite regress in the play and also by way of the death, burial, and the cross recalls the cycle of life and religion.

Vladimir notices that their surroundings have changed since the previous day and Estragon says, “On ne descend pas deux fois dans le même pus.” (84) (“It's never the same pus from one second to the next.”) This French version, with its verb “descend” and “twice” more strongly recalls Greek philosopher Heraclitus’ maxim that “one never sets foot in the same river twice.” This philosophical reference reinforces the image of the river of time previously evoked by the Durance. Vladimir continues to recount the previous day’s events, and Estragon struggles to remember Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir goes further back in time, evoking the pair’s experiences in the Vaucluse. Estragon loses his patience and says he can remember nothing about the Merdecluse. He says, as he has before, that they should go their separate ways. When Vladimir reminds him that he always comes back, Estragon says that the only sure way to separate would be for Vladimir to kill him. And then Estragon says, “En attendant, essayons de converser sans nous exalter, puisque nous sommes incapables de nous taire.” (87) (“In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.”) This line begins with an echo of the title of the play that serves to universalize its meaning. The characters in this play and, indeed, in many other works by Beckett, are impelled to speak. Uttering words is both the driving force of their existence and their sole means of survival. They often view this as a curse and hope for a time when they will be silent.

This may be interpreted as a longing for death and the peace it brings. The two continue thus,

Vladimir. – C'est vrai, nous sommes intarissables.  
Estragon. – C'est pour ne pas penser.  
Vladimir. – Nous avons des excuses.  
Estragon. – C'est pour ne pas entendre.  
Vladimir. – Nous avons nos raisons.  
Estragon. – Toutes les voix mortes.  
Vladimir. – Ça fait un bruit d'ailes.  
Estragon. – De feuilles.  
Vladimir. – De sable.  
(...)  
Vladimir. – Que disent-elles?  
Estragon. – Elles parlent de leur vie.  
Vladimir. – Il ne leur suffit d'avoir vécu.  
Estragon. – Il faut qu'elles en parlent.  
Vladimir. – Il ne leur suffit pas d'être mortes.  
Estragon. – Ce n'est pas assez.  
(Godot 87-88)

Vladimir. – You're right, we're inexhaustible.  
Estragon. – It's so we won't think.  
Vladimir. – We have that excuse.  
Estragon. – It's so we won't hear.  
Vladimir. – We have our reasons.  
Estragon. – All the dead voices.  
Vladimir. – They make a noise like wings.  
Estragon. – Like leaves.  
Vladimir. – Like sand.  
(...)  
Vladimir. – What do they say?  
Estragon. – They talk about their lives.  
Vladimir. – To have lived is not enough for them.  
Estragon. – They have to talk about it.  
Vladimir. – To be dead is not enough for them.  
Estragon. – It is not sufficient.

(Godot 85)

Vladimir and Estragon use language as an escape from the suffering of existence. They use it to shut out their own thoughts and senses. This evokes a direct form of escapism. The idea, however, becomes more complicated when they claim to use

language to shut out the voices they hear. These voices make a rustling noise that is compared to wings and leaves. These voices, unsatisfied with having lived, must speak about their lives. Vladimir and Estragon may simply be hearing voices or this could be a complex metaphor for literature. The voices represent the thoughts and ideas entombed in books over the centuries. They are compared to “wings” and “leaves” to give clues to their deeper meaning: “pen” (from the Latin for feather/quill) and “paper.” These metaphors also have an aural quality associated with “wind” that evokes breath and spoken language. This interpretation is further supported by the numerous literary and philosophical allusions both characters make, some of which have been noted above.

Vladimir and Estragon return to the subject of Godot and seek a means of waiting, i.e., passing the time. Estragon says he is tired and wants to leave. Vladimir responds that they are waiting for Godot. When Estragon asks his friend how to go on, Vladimir replies, “Il n’y a rien à faire.” (96) (“There’s nothing we can do.”) Once again, the first line of the play is repeated therefore reinforcing the circularity of the whole. Vladimir offers Estragon a turnip and the two briefly replay the earlier exchange involving the vegetables in Vladimir’s pockets. The pair begins to lose patience again when Vladimir suggests Estragon try on the “new” boots. In a revealing line, he says, “Ça fera passer le temps.” (97) (“It’d pass the time.”) The struggle to pass the time and escape a excruciating boredom is again rendered explicit in this line. Estragon tries on both shoes and in a comic turn, says they are too big for him.

Vladimir finds Lucky’s hat and decides to try it on. In order to do so he removes his hat and passes it to Estragon, who does the same. This leads to the famous bowler hat scene in which both characters continually put on, remove, and pass bowler hats very

quickly. This comic scene is often cited in relation to vaudeville comedy. Perhaps the significance of this scene is twofold. First, it offers comic relief from the inertia experienced by the main characters and the overall bleak atmosphere of the play. Second, it suggests that all the characters of the play are to some extent interchangeable, which fact may also be true, by extension, for all people. This episode provokes the question of difference and adds to the universality of the play. The idea that difference may be mental and therefore subjective is further developed in the following scene when Vladimir and Estragon pretend to be Pozzo and Lucky and enact a play within the play. Their game ends when Estragon loses patience and runs away. This upsets Vladimir terribly and when he cries out for Estragon, the latter returns. Their embrace emphasizes once more their affection and need for one another. Estragon tells Vladimir that someone is coming and Vladimir says, “C’est Godot! Nous sommes sauvés!” (104) (“It’s Godot! At last! Gogo! It’s Godot! We’re saved!”) This reaction has an obvious religious tone; however, it is likely a mistake to conclude that Godot represents God in some way. Vladimir believes he is saved not from some form of damnation after death but from the hell he suffers on Earth waiting for Godot. Likewise, when Estragon yells, “Je suis damné!” (104) (“I’m in hell!”), he is not making the obvious religious remark but rather, is commenting on his present situation and struggle to wait for Godot.

There is more physical humor as Estragon attempts to run away but falls and then tries to hide behind the tree without success. He asks Vladimir what to do, and the latter says, “Il n’y a rien à faire.”(105) (“There’s nothing to do.”) This is another echo (in the French version) of the beginning of the play and another example of the repetition of events and phrases that characterize the play. They decide to keep watch for passers-by

but no one arrives. Apparently, it is a false alarm. The two decide to pass the time by exercising after making another reference to the title of the play when each says “en attendant” (107) “while waiting.”

Next, Pozzo and Lucky arrive, having changed significantly since their last visit. Now Pozzo is blind and his rope tied to Lucky is much shorter. Lucky wears a new hat. Vladimir is extremely happy that “reinforcements” have arrived in their struggle against boredom. He is assured now that they will make it through the night if they do not have to wait for Godot alone. Pozzo calls for help when he and Lucky fall in a heap. Vladimir and Estragon have an interesting conversation about what they should do next. Estragon wants to take advantage of the situation and either extort more bones out of Pozzo or exact revenge on Lucky for having kicked him. Vladimir is in favor of helping the two in hopes of receiving a reward in recompense:

Vladimir. – Ne perdons pas notre temps en vains discours.  
(*Un temps. Avec véhémence.*) Faisons quelque chose,  
pendant que l’occasion se présente ! Ce n’est pas tous les  
jours qu’on ait besoin de nous. Non pas à vrai dire qu’on  
ait précisément besoin de nous. D’autres feraient aussi bien  
l’affaire, sinon mieux. L’appel que nous venons d’attendre,  
c’est plutôt à l’humanité tout entière qu’il s’adresse. Mais  
à cet endroit, en ce moment, l’humanité, c’est nous, que ça  
nous plaise ou non. Profitons-en, avant qu’il soit trop tard.  
Représentons dignement pour une fois l’engeance ou le  
malheur nous a fourrés. Qu’en dis-tu ? (*Estragon n’en dit  
rien.*) Il est vrai qu’en pesant, les bras croisés, le pour et le  
contre, nous faisons également honneur à notre condition.  
Le tigre se précipite au secours de ses congénères sans la  
moindre réflexion. Ou bien il se sauve au plus profond des  
taillis. Mais la question n’est pas là. Que faisons-nous ici,  
voilà ce qu’il faut demander. Nous avons la chance de le  
savoir. Oui, dans cette immense confusion, une seule chose  
est claire : nous attendons que Godot vienne.

(Godot 111-112)

Vladimir. – Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!  
(*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have  
the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not  
indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet  
the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they  
were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears!  
But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us,  
whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before  
it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul  
brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say?  
(*Estragon says nothing.*) It is true that when with folded  
arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to  
our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners  
without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the  
depths of the thickets. But that is not the question. What are  
we doing here, *that* is the question. And we are blessed in  
this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this  
immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting  
for Godot to come—

(Godot 110-111)

These remarks begin with irony when Vladimir complains they are wasting their time with pointless talk and he urges his friend to act while they still can. Clearly, they have nothing but time and the only way they are capable of passing the time is through talk. Earlier, Vladimir would encourage almost any conversation to pass the time, saying things like, “That’s it, let’s argue!” or “Right, yell at me some more!” Also, these two have been unable to act from the first line of the play. They express their desire to leave, yet are never able to do so. Next, Vladimir expands the context by interpreting Pozzo’s call for help as a call to all of humanity. He reasons further that since only he and Estragon are present, they must be, in this instance, all of humanity. This sweeping statement represents a shift from the narrow context of the individual in the moment to a comprehensive view of all of humanity bound by time. This shift from the micro to the macro suggests a more wide-ranging meaning to the entire play and serves to universalize

the themes developed thus far. Vladimir declares that he wants to represent the human race for once in a dignified way. He considers Estragon and himself to be examples of the human race as good as any. The word “species,” in the English text is translated from the French word “condition.” This translation is important and merits a closer look. This French word in this context evokes the *human* condition, and therefore imparts a philosophical or, more specifically, an existentialist meaning. This idea is supported by Vladimir’s further description of an animal’s reaction in any given situation which, not based on reason, is immediate and instinctual. This striking contrast to mankind emphasizes man’s peculiar predicament. Vladimir is wary of his digression and returns to one central question: what are we doing here? He says he is lucky to know the answer: in this immense confusion the only thing of which they can be sure is that they are waiting for Godot. This begs the question in the larger sense just evoked by Vladimir’s comments on the human race, i.e., what is the human race doing here? This philosophical/existentialist question defies an easy answer. Perhaps, the answer is slightly less complete than Vladimir’s: we are waiting, for whom we do not know.

Vladimir continues his philosophical musings by stating that time passes slowly for Estragon and him and that this difficulty pushes them to “furnish” time with all sorts of actions that may be reasonable or just habitual. Furthermore, he proposes that man’s reason may be inherently faulty. Estragon adds that we are all born crazy and some of us stay that way. This is the first of several references to birth in the play.

Vladimir and Estragon attempt to help Pozzo and Lucky get up but fail and eventually end up on the ground, helpless themselves. Vladimir loses his patience and begins to strike Pozzo who flees at the attack. Vladimir and Estragon attempt to call him

back but are unsuccessful. Estragon's memory is weaker than his companion's and he is uncertain of Pozzo's name. His solution is to call out names at random until they find the correct one. He begins with Abel and then conjectures that Lucky is called Cain. This recalls the earlier references to the Bible when the two discuss the biblical story of the two thieves.

Vladimir and Estragon decide to get up and when they do, Estragon says he wants to leave. Vladimir once again reminds him of their obligation to wait for Godot. They decide to help Pozzo get up. Pozzo announces his blindness and Estragon wonders aloud if he can see clearly in the future. This comment brings to mind two well-known instances of seers in literature. The first is the seer in Oedipus Rex who, though blind, sees the future and correctly predicts Oedipus' fate. This reference is important to a discussion of gender in the play because of its importance to psychoanalysis. The second instance is that of the seers in Dante's hell who also can see the future but remain ignorant of the present. They see the future clearly yet their vision fades and they forget what they have seen as time brings the events nearer. They are blind to everything engulfed by the present. Pozzo closely parallels this idea with his description of his blindness when he says, "Ne me questionnez pas. Les aveugles n'ont pas la notion du temps. (*Un temps.*) Les choses du temps, ils ne les voient pas non plus." (122) ("(*violently*). Don't question me! The blind have no notion of time. The things of time are hidden from them too.") Pozzo asks Estragon to check on Lucky and recommends he pull gently on his rope to make him stir, being careful not to strangle him. If that does not work, he should kick him in the stomach and face as much as possible. Estragon attacks



Lucky, kicking and screaming, but hurts his foot and limps away in pain. He tries to take off his boot but is unsuccessful. This recalls the opening scene of the play.

Vladimir asks Pozzo if he is the same man as the day before. Pozzo says he has no memory of their previous meeting and that he will not remember Vladimir the following day either. Pozzo and Lucky prepare to leave and Vladimir asks what is in the heavy suitcase. Pozzo replies that it is filled with sand. Vladimir also asks that Pozzo command Lucky to sing. Pozzo replies that Lucky is mute. Vladimir asks when this happened. Pozzo gets angry:

Pozzo (*soudain furieux*). – Vous n’avez pas fini de m’empoisonner avec vos histoires de temps ? C’est insensé ! Quand ! Quand ! Un jour, ça ne vous suffit pas, un jour pareil aux autres il est devenu muet, un jour je suis devenu aveugle, un jour nous deviendrons sourds, un jour nous sommes nés, un jour nous mourrons, le même jour, le même instant, ça ne vous suffit pas ? (*Plus posément.*) Elles accouchent à cheval sur une tombe, le jour brille un instant, puis c’est la nuit à nouveau. (*Il tire sur la corde.*) En avant !

(Godot 126)

Pozzo (*suddenly furious.*) – Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (*Calmer.*) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (*He jerks the rope.*) On!

(Godot 124)

These illuminating remarks by Pozzo provide an important key to understanding the structure and events of the entire play. Here, time is the most important element as it is elsewhere in the play. Likewise, time causes frustration and anger. Next, there are two shifts in the concept of time. First, the flow of time becomes imperceptible as all days

run together, indistinguishable, one from another. As Pozzo says, one day something changes and another day something else changes – what is important is the changes that occur, not their place in time. This view of time has already been demonstrated by the change that takes place between acts (leaves on the tree) although only one day has passed. Here, Pozzo makes explicit the idea that all days are the same and changes occur suddenly. Second, Pozzo condenses time dramatically when he says we are born and we die the same day, in the same instant. He illustrates this idea with the striking image of a woman giving birth over a tomb. The child is born and its entire life passes during the instant it sees the light of day. Then it falls dead into the tomb, or the night as Pozzo calls it. This image recalls the abrupt nightfall of the first act and suggests that Pozzo's image reflects on a tiny scale the action of the whole play and perhaps, of all life.

Vladimir questions his own consciousness by hypothesizing that he is and has been asleep. He predicts that the next day will follow a course parallel to that of today and the day before. Then he returns to Pozzo's image of birth and says, "...A cheval sur une tombe et une naissance difficile. Du fond du trou, rêveusement, le fossoyeur applique ses fers. On a le temps de vieillir. L'air est plein de nos cris. (*Il écoute.*) Mais l'habitude est une grande sourdine." (128) ("Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (*He listens.*) But habit is a great deadener"). Vladimir makes the image even more ominous and sinister by making the birth difficult and adding the gravedigger. The latter usurps the usual role of the doctor or midwife who helps bring one into life. Now the helper's role is to bring one into death. Pozzo's original image condenses time but at least allows for an instant of life in the light. This

moment of life has disappeared from Vladimir's image as hands from the tomb reach into the womb to extract the new life and end it. He says that the air is full of cries, presumably of agony but that habit deafens our ears to the noise.

Estragon says he can go on no longer and Vladimir consoles him by saying they will hang themselves the next day or, maybe, meet Godot. Vladimir says they will be saved if Godot comes. The most simple interpretation is that when Godot comes the waiting will be over. This remark is important because it superficially suggests that Godot may symbolize God. A deeper meaning developed from the beginning, however, may be that life is nothing more than waiting and that Godot will never come. It could also be that Godot represents death, which also signifies an end to waiting.

The play ends:

Vladimir. – Alors, on y va?

Estragon. – Allons-y.

*Ils ne bougent pas.*

(Godot 134)

Vladimir. – Well? Shall we go?

Estragon. – Yes, let's go.

*They do not move.*

(Godot 132)

Here the characters' actions belie their words. Both men indicate a desire to leave but do not act. One may wonder whether they truly do not want to move or if they are unable to move. This break between language and action is important because it exemplifies a deeper disconnect that runs through the entire play. Words only approximate reality at best and in this play are often completely divorced from reality.

Simply put, the play is about boredom or what some have called "the suffering of being." The play's two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, await the mysterious

Godot who never comes. Indeed, the suffering of these two is palpable to the extent that they are often at pains to determine whether they really exist. They have disturbing symptoms of being unreal: no dependable memory, diminished mental ability concerning time (future, past), preoccupation with being remembered by others (the boy) and therefore objective proof of their existence.

## **2.5 La Dernière bande (Krapp's Last Tape) and Creative Impasse**

Throughout the French period, Beckett peels away layer after layer of superfluous narrative content and techniques. In the trilogy, (1947-1949), recognizable locations, description, distinguishable characters, and even a narrator are all dispensed with one by one until only one voice remains. This voice in L'Innommable (The Unnamable) claims to have invented everything in the preceding two novels and struggles between self-doubt and a compulsion to express. The novel ends, "...je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer."<sup>23</sup> ("I can't go on, I will go on.") Eventually, Beckett even does away with the voice in his work when he writes the mime piece Acte sans paroles (Act Without Words.)

At least one critic has commented that Beckett experienced a series of creative difficulties just before his return to English, particularly with his plays, La Dernière Bande and Fin de partie. James Knowlson, in his biography of Beckett, devotes an entire chapter to this period entitled, "Impasse and Depression." He explains that production negotiations for the American premiere of Waiting for Godot were unusually long and that Beckett was suffering from "the by now familiar symptoms of creative impasse."<sup>24</sup> He had scrapped the first version of Fin de partie and complained of the misery of self-translation. Business and social calls from old friends required frequent trips to Paris

from his home in Ussy. This left little time for work, for which he already had little motivation, and often put him in a foul mood. In a letter to Tom MacGreevy in the summer of 1955, Beckett wrote, “We spend all the time we can in the country, but I have always to be dodging up to Paris to see this one or that one. Fortunately there is a good train up early in the morning and one back late in the evening, giving one a full day in Paris. But there is not much peace anymore.”<sup>25</sup>

Fin de Partie, which he had started more than a year earlier, was still unfinished, as was his translation of L’Innommable. Beckett retreated from his writing to work in his garden and solve chess problems.<sup>26</sup> Beckett wrote to Barney Rosset, who was waiting to publish L’Innommable, “I have not looked at the new play for some weeks now, nor, I confess, pursued struggle with L’Inno. [L’Innommable] but have dug fifty-six large holes in my “garden” for reception of various plantations, including 39 arbores vitae and a blue cypress.”<sup>27</sup> Beckett, in another letter to Rosset, referred to his difficulty writing as his, “potting inertia.”

One brief respite from these creative difficulties came in a request by the dancer Deryk Mendel for a short mime scenario. In a few weeks time, Beckett dashed off Actes sans paroles. In this piece a single character is tempted by a carafe of water that descends from above. He raises himself by stacking cubes of various sizes but only fails to reach the carafe. Knowlson credits Beckett’s study of behavioral psychology, as well as his reading of Wolfgang Kohler’s book, The Mentality of Apes in which the author describes experiments in which apes stacked blocks in order to reach a banana as the possible sources of the work. Knowlson fails to mention that this work strongly recalls the myth of Tantalus, whose punishment in the underworld was to stand neck-deep in water.

Enticing fruit descended from above but whenever Tantalus would try to eat or drink, the fruit would rise out of reach or the water would recede. Beckett's work and the myth both address frustration and disappointment felt when something is repeatedly offered only to be withdrawn.

Knowlson also recounts that at this time Beckett set himself the task of rereading all of Racine's plays again, 25 years after he had lectured on them at Trinity College. He posits that this intense study of Racine allowed him to focus on the essentials of theater – time, space, and speech. Knowlson describes Racine's plays as having, “virtually immobile characters inhabiting a closed world in which little or nothing changes.” He believes the study of Racine paved the way for Beckett's later highly focused plays like Happy Days.

Eventually, Beckett overcame his inertia and went back to work on Fin de partie and completed the play in February 1956. He then spent weeks revising it in May of the same year, most notably reducing it from two acts to one. Knowlson remarks unequivocally, “The play had given him more difficulty than anything he had written before.”<sup>28</sup>

Following on the success of the mime piece and Beckett's nostalgic return to Racine, there is no doubt that the BBC commission will mark the end of impasse and the beginning of a great creative outburst in English. Perhaps, in consequence, the two radio plays given as examples in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation display an unusual optimism in the face of human suffering and despair in addition to the humor they share with Beckett's other plays. It is also important to note that both plays have prominent female protagonists, which, until this point, was rare in Beckett's work.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The switch to French in 1945 represents a major turning point in Beckett's career. Writing in French gave Beckett an unprecedented control over his style and allowed him to create fiction that was very different from the work he had written in English. Of course, certain core themes remain virtually unchanged throughout Beckett's work, such as alienation, loneliness, and despair. What I am speaking of here is above all a question of style.

This can be compared with James Joyce's use of the stream of consciousness technique. Briefly, stream of consciousness in literature is a mode of writing that records the transient thoughts and emotions of the protagonist. Chronological order is the only organizing principle. The progression of ideas follows no particular logic or narrative sequence. Although many credit Joyce with its invention, Edouard Dujardin (1861–1949), in his novel Les Lauriers sont coupés (1888), was the first to employ this technique in a work of fiction from beginning to end. James Joyce gave a great deal of credit to Dujardin, probably because he viewed stream of consciousness as just that, a technique. He once said, "The only thing that interests me is style." And, "From my point of view, it hardly matters whether technique is 'veracious' or not, it has served me as a bridge over which to march my eighteen episodes, and, once I have got my troops across, the opposing forces can, for all I care, blow the bridge sky-high."<sup>29</sup> Clearly, for Joyce, stream of consciousness was a means to an end. It was a tool with which to create his fictive universe.

Although Beckett claimed to have wanted to write "without style," this is not possible in the literal sense because all writing can be said to have a style. Thus

Beckett's comment must be interpreted. One can suggest that Beckett wanted a style different from his initial one. The early work, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 1, is distinguished by being rhetorical, overtly erudite, and poetic. Beckett, it seems, wanted to eradicate these stylistic flourishes from his writing and found he could do so if he wrote in French. Here, some clarifications are in order. First, "style" is a difficult term to define but in the context of literature can be taken to signify a characteristic way in which a writer expresses himself that is recognizable within a work or in several works. Second, by "poetry" I mean literature written in metrical form. Beckett's early works do not adhere to the strict metrical requirements one usually associates with poetry; however, his use of alliteration and rhyme, as well as his sentence structure, give the writing a poetic quality.

Beckett's exile from Ireland was driven as much, if not more, by his interest in the French language than his dislike for Ireland. It is true that he had an intense, if sometimes strained, relationship with his mother; however, it would be a mistake to deem this relationship the primary cause for his move to France. Beckett's biographer, James Knowlson, has argued convincingly that this relationship never suffered a permanent rift a view that is supported by the fact that Beckett returned home each year to spend at least a month with his mother at the family home. Furthermore, I will argue later that favorable images of Beckett's mother appear in his work immediately following the return to English in 1956.

My reading of En attendant Godot, which may be considered representative of Beckett's French works, has provided examples of the stylistic elements Beckett was able to incorporate into his French writing. I focus on the three areas of plot structure,



language, and gender to discern the salient characteristics of this work and, by extension, this period of French writing. I conclude that En attendant Godot does not have the relatively conventional plot structure based on a journey that the English works share. Instead, the central characters remain static and the action is based on modified repetition from the first to second act. Dramatic tension is built through this repetition and the decline, except for the trees, that it conveys. Another powerful psychological and dramatic device is the complete absence of the titular character.

The language of the play is also very different from that of the English works. The prose is bare, made up mostly of short declarative sentences. Gone are the long-winded, mildly pedantic passages filled with obscure language that characterize the English fiction. Only Lucky's speech can be said to retain these qualities, and this is out of irony and to satirize them.

The gender roles in Beckett's French writing also undergo a change. Previously, most of the women were prostitutes, idiots, or persons worthy of mockery for some other reason. These undeveloped characters remained sketches based on unfavorable stereotypes. Now, in the French period, women are almost as absent as Godot. Ann Beer, who views these works as belonging to a "middle" period in Beckett's writing, comments, "In the middle period, women disappear from view almost altogether; Watt, Mercier and Camier, Godot, Molloy, Malone, The Unnamable, are almost entirely male in their voices and cast of characters."<sup>30</sup> And, for example, when women do appear in En attendant Godot, they are either prostitutes in a joke or the agent of man's creation, suffering, and death because they give birth "astride a grave."

## 2.7 Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Fitch in Beckett and Babel from Cockerham, Harry “Bilingual Playwright,” in Beckett the Shape Changer, ed. Katherine Worth (London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1975). pp. 143

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Fitch in Beckett and Babel from Cockerham, H. in “Bilingual Playwright” p. 156

<sup>3</sup> Cohn, Ruby. Back to Beckett. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974. p. 58-59

<sup>4</sup> Astbury, Helen.

<sup>5</sup> Astbury, Helen.

<sup>6</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 30

<sup>7</sup> Knowlson, James. pp. 23-24

<sup>8</sup> Beckett, Samuel. Collected Poems, 1930-1978. London: J. Calder, 1984. p. 17

<sup>9</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 26

<sup>10</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 40

<sup>11</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 40

<sup>12</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 210

<sup>13</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 346

<sup>14</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 590

<sup>15</sup> Graver, Lawrence “Homage to the Dark Lady Ill Seen Ill Said” in Ben-Zvi, Linda. Women in Beckett : Performance and Critical Perspectives. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990. p.148

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Graver, Lawrence p. 148

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Graver, Lawrence p. 148

<sup>18</sup> The critic David Pattie, in a section of his book The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett, entitled “Beckett the Cartesian,” notes the importance of philosophy, specifically, Cartesian philosophy in Beckett’s work.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Pattie, David p. 106

<sup>20</sup> Pattie, David. 106

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Pattie, David. p. 107

<sup>22</sup> Pattie, David. p. 107

<sup>23</sup> Beckett, Samuel. L’innommable. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1953. p. 213

<sup>24</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 377

<sup>25</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 382

<sup>26</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 383

<sup>27</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 383

<sup>28</sup> Knowlson, James. p. 384

<sup>29</sup> Norris, David and Carl Fllint. Introducing Joyce. New York: Totem Books, 1997 p. 100

<sup>30</sup> See Beer, Ann "No-Man's-Land: Beckett's Bilingualism as Autobiography." p. 173

## CHAPTER 3. THE RETURN TO ENGLISH IN 1956

This chapter will discuss Beckett's return to English as the language of the first versions of several important works. Though Beckett will continue to compose in French after 1955, this marks the end of the period during which he publishes new works almost exclusively in French. The works composed directly in English distinguish themselves from those of the French period for their use of language. Specifically, the influence of music and poetry, as well as the unessential elements that Beckett had worked so hard to strip away from his writing, will return in many ways. The shift back to English leads to a prolific period during which Beckett writes more works and writes them faster.

The end of the French period marks a slowing of Beckett's output and a period of creative difficulties, especially with his play, La Dernière bande. In contrast, the return to English ushers in a very prolific phase in which Beckett completes new works relatively quickly. Chapters 4 and 5 will focus on two works from this period: All that Fall and Happy Days in order to demonstrate the effect of this linguistic shift on Beckett's writing.

Although these works will be discussed in detail in the chapters dedicated to them, one clear example of Beckett's emergence from the phase of creative impasse is that his play Happy Days had its premiere at the Cherry Lane Theater in New York on September 17, 1961, only eleven months after he began work on it.

S.E Gontarski, in his book, Beckett's Happy Days: A Manuscript Study, traces the compositional history of Happy Days through primary documents. Gontarski states that one early fragment, together with seven full versions of the play, provide the most complete compositional record of any work by Beckett.<sup>1</sup> As Gontarski reviews the three holograph and four typescript versions of the play, he notes the consistency and speed

with which Beckett wrote the play. Gontarski states, “And finally, although Beckett wrote steadily, finishing the complete one-act version in just over three months, typing that version in one day (between the completion of H-1, January 14, 1961, and the beginning of H-2, January 16), and then immediately beginning H-2, an uncharacteristic break of eleven days exists between the completion of Act I and the beginning of Act II of H-2. This is the only time during the composition of the play where a break of any length is apparent.”<sup>2</sup>

Short though it is, the eleven-day break in the writing draws attention for its contrast to the otherwise quick completion of the first version of the play. Gontarski pursues a structural explanation for the delay, arguing that during this time Beckett decided to make the play two acts instead of one to give it symmetry and balance. Gontarski compares the genesis of Happy Days with that of Endgame and contrasts Beckett’s differing solutions to the structural difficulties presented by both. In the case of the former, a second act was added while in the case of the latter, material was cut.

This chapter will begin with general remarks on the later English plays. One section will discuss how a request from the BBC for the play All that Fall was critical to this transition and also, how radio was a challenging new medium for Beckett that promised much potential. Just as writing in French allowed Beckett to manipulate his acquired language like a tool, working with the BBC opened up the vast creative possibilities of radio. This chapter will discuss some of the challenges Beckett found working in a new medium, his involvement with the radio avant-garde, and the technological advancements of the time occurring in the field.

This chapter will also include a discussion of women in Beckett as they are presented from early in his career through the French period in preparation for discussions of the two female protagonists in All that Fall and Happy Days in Chapters Four and Five. I will review the work of several leading critics in the area of gender in Beckett studies, including Linda Ben-Zvi, in order to argue that the return to English represents a fundamental change in Beckett's attitude toward women in his writing. I will show that while the early female characters in Beckett's work are little more than sketches of women, the major female protagonists of the later works of the second English period possess a depth of psychology their predecessors lack.

In the second English period, Beckett wrote several works that seem to draw on memories of his mother. The last section of this chapter will discuss one striking example found in the female protagonist of Footfalls in the context of Beckett's relationship with his mother. The fact that the women share the name "May" is only the starting point for this examination of the biographical elements and attitude toward gender that characterize this play. Unlike the critics who believe echoes of Beckett's mother appear only in the author's very last works, I will argue that the return to English both facilitates and inaugurates Beckett's use of these images of his mother. This discussion will be followed up with comparisons of the female protagonists of All that Fall and Happy Days with May Beckett in the following two chapters.

Finally, I will conclude that Beckett's return to English was, in large part, a fortuitous event with unforeseen effects. The newfound medium of radio opened up new possibilities that had a profound impact on his writing. The very nature of radio brought the oral quality of language and now, the English language, to the fore and thrust Beckett

back to the lyricism, music, and poetry he had so desperately tried to eliminate from his work. This shift ushered in a prolific period during which Beckett's writing is also remarkable for its change in attitude toward women.

### **3.1 General Information about the Later Plays Composed in English**

If one compares the early prose texts from the first English period with those texts from the French period, several important differences are immediately evident. First, the English texts are much more autobiographical. These works, set in the author's native Ireland, develop characters heavily based on people the author knew. For example, James Knowlson has identified several of the major and minor characters in Dream of Fair to Middling Women. The Polar Bear is clearly recognizable as Beckett's professor from Trinity named Rudmose-Brown. The French character Lucien is based on Jean Beaufret, Beckett's friend at the Ecole Normale. Other characters are based on Beckett's real life friends, Alfred Peron, Georges Pelorosan, and Henri Evrard.

Beckett never again included such thinly veiled characters based on real people in his work after Dream of Fair to Middling Women. However, a recognizable Irish setting does reappear in the works that Beckett writes directly in English after 1954. Also, these works contain autobiographical images based on one very important real life person: Beckett's mother. In her essay, "Beckett's Bilingualism as Autobiography," Ann Beer writes, "From the 1950s, however, Beckett's curiosity about gender, or his sense of the artistic potential of a new direction, surfaced. For some critics and psychologists, the death of his own, apparently very dominant, mother in 1950 gave him a crucial release. His writing from then on illustrates an increasing sensitivity to gender-stereotyping as a powerful, because still unseen, form of dualistic control, a barrier to freedom."<sup>3</sup> For

Beer, the death of Beckett's mother allows the author to develop the strong female protagonists of the works Happy Days, Footfalls, Not I, Rockaby, and Ill Seen Ill Said. Interestingly, Beer dates this change to 1950 even though the first of these works, Happy Days, is not written until 1961. It was not just the death of Beckett's mother that was necessary for the creation of these works but also Beckett's return to English. Like Ann Beer, few critics address the apparent joy with which Beckett returns to his native language, and with it, to works that evoke the mother.

Music interested Beckett from a young age and he became quite an accomplished piano player. Although music is a minor influence on the work from the first English period and then the French period, it becomes a structuring principle in the play All that Fall. The latter play is based, I will argue, on the structure of the sonata. This feature, like the Irish setting and autobiographical elements, ties the second English period with the first. In the novel Dream of Fair to Middling Women, the narrator says, "Why we want to drag in the Syra-Cusa at this juncture it passes our persimmon to say. She belongs to another story . . . We could chain her up with the Smeraldina-Rima and the little Alba . . . and make it look like a sonata, with recurrence of themes, key signatures, plagal finale and all . . . She could be coaxed into most anything . . . A paragraph ought to fix her."<sup>4</sup> Here the narrator suggests how he might continue the story with a musical structure, something he ultimately has neither the energy nor inclination to do. Although just a brief passage in an early work, this allusion to the sonata is important because it describes exactly what Beckett will do when he returns to English with the play All that Fall.



In his book, Mediations, Martin Esslin writes, “Thematically, All that Fall clearly links up with Beckett’s last work in English, Watt. The cast of seedy genteel Irish types, the provincial milieu, even the railway station, clearly belong to the same world. But whereas Watt is still narrated in a clinically cool, objective manner, the action of All that Fall is experienced by the listener subjectively from Maddy Rooney’s point of view.”<sup>5</sup> Here Esslin points out the important thematic similarities shared by Watt and All that Fall, the works which bookend the French period. Esslin goes on to discuss the new effects radio allows by creating a space that is half objective and half subjective, given one can listen to external events as well as to the musings of the mind that interprets these same events. What results for Esslin is a dreamlike state in which it is hard to distinguish reality from fantasy. What interests me more, however, about this linking of Watt and All that Fall is not the narrative possibilities of the different media but the manner in which Beckett returns to these same themes in a striking new style. For example, there is more emphasis on spoken language, which may be expected in a play written for radio, and there are more directly autobiographical elements. I will elaborate on these in the chapter devoted entirely to All that Fall. The most important difference is without question the way Beckett develops the female character. A comparison of Celia with Maddy Rooney shows striking changes.

These remarks have demonstrated that both the play that marks the return to English, All that Fall, and Happy Days are directly linked to Beckett’s earlier English works. These links are stylistic, thematic, and autobiographical. This chapter will be devoted to Beckett’s return to English: how it came about and why it is of critical importance to any understanding of Beckett’s oeuvre.

### 3.2 An Invitation from the BBC

Now I would like to address one of the myths or clichés, as Martin Esslin calls it<sup>6</sup>, in Beckett studies concerning a so-called commission from the BBC. It has been well documented that in 1956 Beckett returns to English with his radio play All that Fall after writing, with very few exceptions, new works only in French for the previous decade. This is a critical turning point in Beckett's career and therefore the circumstances of this shift merit close scrutiny.

In his book Samuel Beckett, Charles Lyons begins the fourth chapter, "In 1956 the BBC commissioned Samuel Beckett to write a script suitable for radio production, and the playwright set to work on the text that became All that Fall."<sup>7</sup> And in her widely criticized biography, Samuel Beckett, Deirdre Bair also claims that Beckett's play was a commission when she writes, "In 1955, the BBC, aware of the international attention being given to Beckett, commissioned a radio play from him..."<sup>8</sup> One can understand, however, how these mistakes were made for as Martin Esslin, who was working for the BBC drama department at the time and therefore would have had first-hand knowledge of these events, points out, "Even the cover of the first American publication of All that Fall and Embers in the Grove Press paperback, Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (1960), baldly states: "two radio plays commissioned by the BBC's Third Programme."<sup>9</sup> More careful scholars and most recent critical works have avoided this error. Hugh Kenner claims in his book, A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett, that Beckett had written only some of his works at the suggestion of others and that these did not figure among his very best. Kenner remarks, "But suggestions – not commissions, since he will not regard an arrangement as binding until he has in fact been able to execute the work –

suggestions, then, have led him into adventures with several media he would likely not otherwise have explored.”<sup>10</sup> This statement is important not only because in it Kenner carefully distinguishes between suggestions and commissions but also for its emphasis on the fortuitous nature of Beckett’s turn to new media when writing new works. And James Knowlson, refers to the BBC’s request of Beckett for a new work written specifically for radio as an “invitation.” He begins the fourth section of his seventeenth chapter, “Beckett wrote his first play for radio, All that Fall, during the summer of 1956 at the invitation of the BBC.”<sup>11</sup>

One may ask why this question is important at all. The answer lies in an examination of the different circumstances under which Beckett wrote and the shift between major linguistic periods in his career. Early on, Beckett did indeed write works on commission to supplement his income, usually book and art reviews. These early commissioned works helped Beckett to survive materially as well as develop his style and hone his skills as a writer. In 1955, the BBC request for an original work in English for the Third Programme provides a critical motivation for Beckett to write. This request helps Beckett to survive artistically by allowing him to explore new media, as Kenner points out in the passage quoted above. Finally, Beckett is able to escape the dead end that characterizes the end of the French period, as described in the preceding section. Beckett is free to explore his usual themes of loneliness and suffering as well as to develop powerful female characters in new media and in his native language.

When the germ of All that Fall came to him, Beckett hesitated at first, but wrote to a friend, Nancy Cunard, “Never thought about radio play technique but in the dead of t’other night got a nice gruesome idea full of cartwheels and dragging of feet and puffing

and panting which may or may not lead to something.”<sup>12</sup> This of course was the origin of All that Fall, the first of five radio plays Beckett would write over the next 20 years. It is important to note the enthusiasm Beckett shows for this unexpected opportunity to return to writing in English. The BBC request marks a crucial turning point in Beckett’s career and resulted in an opportunity for him to further his overall project in new and unexpected ways.

### **3.3 Radio Technique: Voice, Background Sounds, and Music**

When Beckett received a request in 1955 for a radio play, he was intrigued by the possibilities offered by this new medium. He intuited immediately how he could create subtle dramatic effects out of common radio conventions. He also knew how to take advantage of the supposed weaknesses of radio and turn them to strengths because this type of theater necessitates a shift of emphasis from physical aspects to voices and, therefore, language. As music and background sounds replace the stage décor, voice must communicate a great deal more than in ordinary theater because in a radio play, voice is constantly threatened with silence. Bodies are invisible and can therefore contribute nothing. In this light, the author’s decision concerning the gender of his protagonist in All that Fall is no small matter. For the first time, Beckett’s main character is a woman. And though couples have often been an integral component in his work, (Mercier et Camier, Didi and Gogo, Pozzo and Lucky, etc.) there have rarely been female characters. It is significant that Beckett chooses to have a female protagonist in this play when voice is critical and he is returning to his mother tongue. For all of these reasons, it is no surprise that Beckett is concerned with language in this work. What is new, however, is his effort to develop a female protagonist with great psychological depth.

Katharine Worth, in her essay, “Beckett and the Radio Medium,” comments on the time Beckett spent writing new works in French and his subsequent return to his native language in the radio play All that Fall. She writes,

A spell of writing in ‘no-tone’ French seemed to have had an invigorating effect on his relationship with English, for when he came back to his first language in the radio plays he was able to make dramatic capital out of the very difficulties he had experienced with too much tone in the past. He took advantage of the ‘blind’ situation of his audience, which necessarily involves closer listening, to make demands for very close listening indeed, listening such as the artist himself must practice, in order to distinguish the right tones, the natural from the affected, the true from the false, the half realized from the fully realized.”

One of the ways in which Beckett turned the deficit of sight in radio to his advantage was to include blind characters in his work, like Mr. Rooney in All that Fall, and the old blind man in Embers. This handicap reminds the listener of his own inability to see and deepens his identification with the character. One of the most subtle and poignant sounds in All that Fall is the soft tapping of Mr. Rooney’s cane when contrasted against the great noise of the train.

In order to better understand Beckett’s accomplishment and to contextualize his efforts in radio, some background information on the BBC is useful. The British Broadcasting Corporation began its first daily broadcasting 14 November, 1923.<sup>13</sup> Since that time it has had to continually adapt to the needs of evolving political and societal situations. It has done so, in part, through technical changes and advances. One can discern three distinct phases of the BBC: prewar, wartime, and postwar. The first consisted of only two programs, the National and the Regional, which were merged into the Home Service in response to the demands of wartime. During the war, the General

Forces Programme was also introduced to improve the morale of troops and allow them and their families at home to share the same news at the same time.<sup>14</sup> The final phase consisted of reorganization largely along class lines into the Light, Home, and Third Programmes. The director of the BBC, Sir William Haley, believed this division would provide listeners with a “complete cultural spectrum.”<sup>15</sup> This structure allowed for broadcasts aimed at large audiences seeking popular entertainment while not neglecting avant-garde productions aimed at more intellectual listeners. In the early seventies the BBC programs were again overhauled and renamed. The light entertainment was called Radio 1 while classical music was broadcast on Radio 2 and what had been the Third Programme was now called Radio 3. The Home Service became Radio 4 and Radio 5, a 24-hour news station, was added. These changes were due to shifting demands of the public driven, in part, by radio “pirates” broadcasting popular music from ships in the North Sea.<sup>16</sup>

The Third Programme was “designed for the attentive listener who, on occasion, is prepared to listen to broadcasts that are demanding and of considerable length.”<sup>17</sup> Though it faced financial vulnerabilities and criticism for segregating programming, the Third Programme gave artists the chance to broadcast experimental works. Georges Barnes, who was in control of programming, supported artistic innovation and helped to make the Third Programme a driving force in the avant-garde of music and literature.<sup>18</sup>

Since the first radio plays in which actors shared a single microphone and followed the instruction of a pantomiming director, there has been a technological revolution in radio. Early on, the introduction in 1928 of the control panel allowing live mixing from one studio to another divided the studio space. Several different rooms were

used for recording actors while a separate “noise room” was reserved for sound effects. The introduction of portable recording devices allowed actors to be recorded alone and then mixed into the larger production. In fact, Beckett’s play, Krapp’s Last Tape, explored Beckett’s fascination with the portable tape recorder and its ability to capture, store, and edit voices.

Probably the biggest advancement in radio came in the 1950s with the introduction of Frequency Modulation (FM) and Very High Frequency (VHF), which dramatically enhanced the sound quality of broadcasts. With almost no interference, listeners could better hear a radio play and discern its nuances. Second to FM was the introduction of stereo sound which allowed the placement of sound on the left or right. Voices which previously could only approach or recede through a fade, could now move back and forth laterally. Berge writes in her thesis, “Characters may thus be perceived, or located, in terms of the microphone's own ‘viewpoint.’ This may be static, allowing the voices to do the moving, or in motion, ‘moving’ the microphone with the characters.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of All that Fall, Beckett kept the microphone always with Mrs. Rooney, the protagonist. This strengthens her role by making it clear she is the main character and allowing her to narrate events which do not depend on dialogue. All other sounds are faded up which creates the effect that they gradually arrive from a distance.

Beckett’s demands for elaborate sound effects in All that Fall tested the limits of the technology of the time and demonstrated the need for further advances. Katharine Worth writes, “Donald McWhinnie and Martin Esslin tell how the highly complex and sophisticated sound effects required for All that Fall forced radical experiments in the

BBC sound effects department and resulted in the creation of a new Radiophonic Workshop.”<sup>20</sup>

In his book, Mediations, Martin Esslin gives very detailed information on Beckett’s work in radio. Esslin is an unusually strong authority on this subject, thanks to having worked many years for the BBC and, more specifically, during the period in question. He recounts Beckett’s relationship with the BBC’s Third Programme and describes the innovative force that the production of Beckett’s first radio play had on radio technique in Britain. “New methods,” Esslin writes, “had to be found to extract the various sounds needed (both animal and mechanical – footsteps, cars, bicycle wheels, the train, the cart) from the simple naturalism of the hundreds of records in the BBC’s effects library. Briscoe [sound technician] (and his gramophone operator, Norman Baines) had to invent ways and means to remove these sounds from the purely realistic sphere. They did so by treating them electronically: slowing down, speeding up, adding echo, fragmenting them by cutting them into segments, and putting them together in new way.”<sup>21</sup>

In All that Fall, Beckett perhaps realized that the sound effects would risk becoming outdated. In the play, he used them to avoid any sense of realism and to create a strict metrical pattern. The opening animal sounds, for instance, are all obvious human imitations. These effects, in contrast with today’s more sophisticated technology, are now considered old-fashioned. Beckett may have been aware, as Berge comments convincingly, that this only serves to heighten the themes of the play. She writes,

At any rate, if we look at the general state of affairs in All That Fall, irrespective of the technical quality of the sound effects, we find that: the bicycle brakes squeak; the bicycle itself bumps along with a flat tire; the car engine needs to



be choked into action; Mrs. Rooney's voice is old and broken, and Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" is played on an old gramophone. Practically every element in All That Fall displays some degree of ageing or decay.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.4 Linda Ben-Zvi's Women in Beckett on gender in Beckett

Any thoughtful consideration of gender in Beckett must take account of the insightful and compelling critical information in Linda Ben-Zvi's book, Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives. The book is a collection of interviews and critical essays devoted entirely to questions of gender in Beckett. The book is divided into two sections and the first, "Acting Beckett's Women," is made up of 12 interviews with noteworthy Beckettian actresses from around the world. In most cases, these were women who had acted in many of Beckett's plays, were directed by Beckett himself and, in some cases, may have had parts specifically written for them. These women, having often worked closely with Beckett, were able to provide the unique perspective of one who had performed Beckett's female roles in an authorized production. The second section of the book, "Re-acting to Beckett's Women," consists of 19 critical essays divided into the following four subsections: "Fiction," "From Fiction to Drama," "Drama: The Stage," and "Drama: Radio & Television." These sections are more or less organized in chronological order to parallel early, middle, and late Beckett and contain essays from the leading critics in Beckett studies. Although they cover a wide variety of topics, the common thread that binds them is Beckett's treatment of gender.

Ben-Zvi begins her analysis by remarking, "The metaphysical human condition Beckett describes is not gender specific."<sup>23</sup> This important concession might seem to suggest that gender is not relevant to Beckett studies. However, she goes on to explain that all of Beckett's characters live in a world, "...shaped to a large degree by societal

constructs of gender that so often mark male and female behavior and shape personality.”<sup>24</sup> Armed with the justification for her inquiry, Ben-Zvi gives a couple of examples of how this gendered world is reflected in Beckett’s works. First, Beckett’s women have more difficulty coping with the passage of time, the universal enemy of Beckett’s characters, because of society’s pressure on women to appear always young and beautiful. For an example of this gender-specific suffering, one need only think of Winnie holding up the mirror in Happy Days. Second, Beckett has been steadfast in his refusal to allow the gender of his characters to be changed in theatrical productions. This is a revealing refusal because, as Ben-Zvi points out, it does not deny the suffering of women, it simply demonstrates that for Beckett, the form of that suffering in a gendered world is important. Simply put, society dictates that men suffer one way and women another. Ben-Zvi remarks that it is because the form is so closely tied to the theme in these works that questions of gender should not be ignored.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, Beckett’s early fiction is the domain of males and perhaps it is not by accident, as Ben-Zvi points out, that the protagonists of the earlier works most often begin with the letter M or its inverse W as has been noted above in the brief comments about names in Beckett in Chapter 4. The most important of these in the early fiction are Murphy, Molloy, Malone, Moran, and Watt. I would add however that the central female roles of the later works make ample use of the same letters – Maddy in All that Fall, Winnie in Happy Days, and May in Footfalls. Beckett’s attention to detail and names is well known and here is another example of the late Beckett “Women/feMales” appropriating the letters M and W of the early Beckett “Men/Males.”

Ben-Zvi's analysis first reviews the many minor female characters in the early works and demonstrates that they follow conventional stereotypes of mothers and lovers with few exceptions. These women are always dependent on the male characters for their existence and meaning. Ben-Zvi writes, "It is *his* struggles with them [women], *his* fears of them, and *his* need for them which shape the actions and the portraits Beckett offers."<sup>26</sup> She also points out that it is not until the late fiction, in plays like Happy Days, that Beckett's women develop beyond shallow projections of male desire and fear into "real" women struggling with the same metaphysical questions as Beckett's men but in different and specifically feminine ways. It is society's conditioning of women that causes them to react to adversity the way they do in these plays. The quintessential example is Winnie buried in her mound in Happy Days. She has all the accessories, including bag, makeup, and umbrella, as well as the polite routine – she says her prayers and reads the classics – that society demands of a proper lady. And yet, she is keenly aware of her horrifying situation and struggles to survive. Her exhortation to herself in the face of overwhelming despair, "on Winnie," ties her to the male characters of the French period who use similar expressions like the Unnamable whose last words are, "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." Ben-Zvi comes to the remarkable conclusion that many of Beckett's actresses echo in interviews when she remarks, "Beckett's Winnie is thus not only a woman; she is the physical embodiment of the *condition* of being a woman in her society."<sup>27</sup>

Ben-Zvi proposes the very interesting thesis in her introduction that Beckett's depictions of women in his later works surpass his earlier stereotypic sketches and present true women in a gendered world. While I agree with this thesis, for the purposes

of the present study, I would seek to develop it by emphasizing chronology in the context of the three periods of Beckett's writing I have outlined. The shift over time in Beckett's treatment of women that Ben-Zvi perceives is better understood in this larger, more structured, context. Ben-Zvi, using "fiction" to mean *early* fiction and specifically not the theater, states her thesis thus, "Perhaps because the fiction has its genesis in an earlier period of Beckett's own personal and professional development, his early portraits of women in the fiction are far more stereotypic and scathing than any in the later drama, the author less distanced from the gender stereotype he is depicting."<sup>28</sup> This statement begs two important questions: How and why does Beckett's early personal and professional development color his attitude toward gender? And, how and why is the author less distanced from the women of the later plays? Although Ben-Zvi goes on to outline the basic differences between Beckett's early and late female characters, supporting her claims with examples, she leaves these two important questions unanswered, yet the critical essays in the latter half of the book do address these points indirectly.

In relation to the first question regarding gender, two essays in particular stand out: "Beckett and the Heresy of Love" by James Acheson and "Clods, Whores, and Bitches: Misogyny in Beckett's Early Fiction" by Susan Brienza. Acheson uses examples taken from Beckett's works, "Assumption," "First Love," Murphy, and Krapp's Last Tape, to demonstrate Beckett's shifting attitude towards love over time. Acheson develops the thesis that love is first seen to threaten the artist with destruction but that in the later works it also offers a fleeting chance of happiness. In the early texts such as

“Assumption” and Murphy, Beckett’s characters possess what Acheson calls a “religion of self.”<sup>29</sup>

In Beckett’s first short story, “Assumption,” this religion is based upon the artist/protagonist’s desire to create perfect art. Beckett’s unnamed protagonist “struggle[s] for divinity”<sup>30</sup> by attempting to resolve what will become a common Beckettian dilemma: the compulsion to express, coupled with a lack of anything to express. With this situation at hand, “the Woman”<sup>31</sup> enters the text. The capital W here and, by extension the generalization of all women, is not to be overlooked. Importantly, her arrival is compared to an “irruption of demons”<sup>32</sup> thereby rounding out the religious metaphor and creating the possibility of what Acheson calls the heresy of love because “in spite of himself, the artist finds her attractive.”<sup>33</sup> The affair with the Woman and subsequent sexual union seems at first to lead to spiritual enlightenment for, as Acheson points out, mystic knowledge of God is often expressed in sexual terms. However, Acheson makes the argument that it is more likely the case that the artist has simply been distracted from his religion of self and this ultimately leads to his destruction. At the end of the story the Woman is “swept aside”<sup>34</sup> by the artist’s overpowering and fatal urge to express, which results in a great shriek.

In her essay, “Clods, Whores, and Bitches: Misogyny in Beckett’s Early Fiction,” Susan Brienza sums up the women of early Beckett texts thus, “A concentrated reading of the early fiction reveals a disturbing negative depiction of female characters: coupled with a pervasive disgust, cruel humor, and Swiftian revilement toward her physicality is the idea that woman as clod of earth impedes intellectual man.”<sup>35</sup> Brienza notes that the early female characters vacillate between extremes that result in stereotypes or parodies

of stereotypes. They are either attractive, in which case they are perceived as a threat to the male characters, or they are grotesque, in which case they are ridiculed. The men, informed with Cartesian philosophy, are intensely aware of a mind/body split. Unlike the romantics, for them sensuality does not offer a path to spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, the women, as impediments to intellectual transcendence, are to be feared, even loathed.

In answer to the second question posed earlier regarding the women in the later plays, I would argue that it is Beckett's return to his mother tongue and an important biographical event, his mother's death in 1950, that facilitate the strikingly more developed portrayals of women in the later plays. Ultimately, Beckett's attitude toward gender evolves over time in relation to his unique bilingualism. I will develop this idea further in the following two chapters, which are devoted to a radio play, All that Fall, and a stage play, Happy Days, both of which feature prominent female protagonists.

### **3.5 Footfalls and May Beckett**

In this section I would like to provide an example of one of Beckett's later plays, Footfalls, and analyze its possible autobiographical elements and themes of gender. Although this play is written after All that Fall and Happy Days, which are the focus of this dissertation, the play is in many ways the culmination of Beckett's new attitude toward gender and autobiography that the return to English initiates.

Footfalls, written in English in 1975, is a very short play which follows the interaction of two characters, the disheveled and gray-haired May and a Woman's Voice. Onstage, May is confined to a very narrow strip of space that allows exactly seven (nine, in a later version) steps. She continually paces up and down this space, turning when she

reaches its extremity. A trailing wrap hides her feet. Stage directions indicate her steps make a “clearly audible rhythmic tread” and the lighting is described as “dim, strongest at floor level, less on body, least on head.”<sup>36</sup>

This play is fascinating in many respects and serves as a striking example of Beckett’s “theatereality” (Ruby Cohn’s term) in David Pattie’s essay, “Space, Time and the Self in Beckett’s Late Theatre.” In his essay, Pattie reviews the canonical approach in Beckett criticism to the ways in which Beckett undermines the conventions of dramatic time and space. Briefly, this view holds that Beckett’s characters exist only in the moment of performance. They have no past nor future nor realm of being beyond the stage that would rely on a willing suspension of disbelief. This leaves only the subject, whose very existence, as Pattie argues, is profoundly called into question.

However, it is not my intention in this section to evaluate Pattie’s arguments but instead to examine the possible autobiographical elements and themes of gender in this play. Pattie’s thesis that this play furthers Beckett’s wide-ranging tendency toward the disintegration of the self in his plays is important, for it shows that although Beckett’s treatment of language and gender change after the return to English, his major themes do not.

The first potentially autobiographical elements one notices in this text are the lone character name and her relationship to Voice. The play begins:

M: Mother. [*Pause. No louder.*] Mother.

[*Pause*]

V: Yes, May.

M: Were you asleep?

V: Deep asleep. [*Pause.*] I heard you in my deep sleep.

[*Pause.*] There is no sleep so deep that I would not hear you there. [*Pause. M resumes pacing. Four lengths. After first length, synchronous with steps.*] One two three four

five six seven eight nine wheel one two three four five six  
seven eight nine wheel. (*Collected Shorter Plays* 239)

The first word of the play establishes the relationship between the two characters and initiates the mother/daughter theme that will be developed throughout the play. The second line reveals the name of the speaker, May, which was also Beckett's mother's name. The author's concern with names is well established and so this coincidence cannot be overlooked. It is also important to point out that the play assigns lines to M and not May, which recalls Beckett's preoccupation with this letter along with its inverse when May refers to a Mrs. W.

The status of both characters is unclear from the beginning given the indeterminacy and ritualistic repetition that surrounds them. The character Voice is particularly obscure and quite possibly only exists in May's head. May's apparent old age, signified by her grey hair, the reference to sleep, and the emphasis on a deep sleep evoke death and the possibility May is communicating with her dead mother. The bond between mother and daughter is presented as unbreakable when Voice says there is no sleep so deep she would not hear May. The last line quoted above works to shift the relationship from two adults to adult and child, which further brings one's focus to the strength of this primal bond. This shift occurs as May counts her steps like a child first learning numbers and synchronizes her steps with the numbers, thereby reducing their abstraction to a physical act. One of the difficulties of this play is that the words synchronize with the action even while the characters move towards disintegration.

Mary Bryden, in her book, Women in Samuel Beckett's Prose and Drama, devotes a chapter to the figure of the mother in Beckett's writing entitled, "Otherhood/Motherhood/Smotherhood? The Mother in Beckett's Writing" in which she



carefully traces depictions of parenthood in Beckett's work. She argues that fathers are generally absent from the fiction and show little affection to their offspring when they are present. Mothers are much more common and presented as solely responsible for the suffering of existence. In bearing children, they condemn them to a life filled with pain and the fate of certain death.<sup>37</sup> Beckett often complained of horrific prenatal memories. Birth is given special status throughout his writing as the painful beginning of a life of suffering. In the early fiction, women bear the blame for the brutal act of birth. This changes, however, in the later works. "...the mother relation," Bryden writes, "undergoes (though perhaps more slowly and painfully) the same process of 'deterritorialisation' as does the woman-figure, leading to a much gentler incorporation of the maternal referent in Beckett's later work."<sup>38</sup> Bryden cites Footfalls as an example, in which she claims the apprehended presences are strikingly tender images of the female. This is in part based on the opening passage quoted above, which reveals a remarkably strong and affectionate mother/daughter relationship.

Bryden points out that this is also the only play in which a mother asks her child forgiveness for bringing her into the world. Voice says, "I had you late. [*Pause.*] In life. [*Pause.*] Forgive me again. [*Pause. No louder.*] Forgive me again."<sup>39</sup> The singularity of this relationship leads Bryden to view it in terms of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) as theorized by Hélène Cixous. While the scope of this dissertation does not allow a comprehensive review of this theory, certain salient characteristics of the play may be noted and viewed in this perspective.

The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism defines *écriture féminine* as "a radical, disruptive mode of "feminine" writing that is opposed to patriarchal discourse

with its rigid grammar, boundaries, and categories; tapping into the Imaginary, it gives voice to the unconscious, the body, the nonsubjective, and polymorphous drives.” This theory follows from Jacques Lacan’s theory of psychosocial development which the Norton Anthology describes as “an “Imaginary order” – a mother-centered, nonsubjugated, presymbolic, pre-oedipal space of bodily drives and rhythms (linked with the unconscious).” Although rooted in Freud’s theory of the Oedipal complex, Cixous’ view concentrates on the pre-oedipal stage of development. It therefore privileges experience over language and avoids the limits of logocentrism. Cixous believes that men are capable of feminine writing and cites Jean Genet and James Joyce as examples. In my view, Beckett’s Footfalls also fits into this category.

As Bryden notes, feminine writing has endeavored to deconstruct taboos based on the female body while simultaneously locating the creation of the text in the female body.<sup>40</sup> In this context, materiality is of the utmost importance. May, like almost all of Beckett’s characters, is constantly threatened with disintegration, yet never succumbs to this danger. Physicality is underscored when Voice quotes May as a child, “Till one night, while still little more than a child, she called her mother and said, Mother, this is not enough. The mother: Not enough? May – the child’s given name –May: not enough. The mother: What do you mean, May, not enough, what can you possibly mean, May, not enough? May: I mean, Mother, that I must hear the feet, however faint they fall.”<sup>41</sup>

Another quality of feminine writing that Footfalls possesses is a lowering of the status of sight. This is in opposition to the gaze of the patriarch which may be directed at the female object. In compensation for the diminished sight, the senses of touch and hearing are promoted. Bryden remarks on the aural qualities of the play when she writes,

“the decentring voice projection techniques in these late plays: by means of these, the spectator/listener, straining for vision, is rendered intensely dependent upon the voice-sounds throughout.” These techniques, of course, originate in Beckett’s radio plays, which achieve the same effect.

The final and most important quality of feminine writing that Footfalls demonstrates is that of the mother/daughter relationship, which Cixous describes, “En la femme, la mère et la fille se retrouvent, se préservent, l’une avec l’autre, l’enfance entre dans la maturité” (La Venue à l’écriture)<sup>42</sup> These qualities are evident in the characters May and Voice as they compare their memories of past events. Bryden sums up, “The voicing of exile, the privileging of mother/daughter bonding with its capacities for interfusion, the ample recourse to multiple voicing, ambiguity, repetition and open-endedness, the resistance to penetration by patriarchal spectatorship, to explicitness, foreclosure and appropriation: these characteristics all invite Footfalls and Rockaby into allegiance with *écriture féminine*.”<sup>43</sup>

### 3.6 Conclusion

Beckett was never again to be as prolific as he had been during the French period, when writing in French was “exciting” and motivating. This burst of output could not, however, be maintained indefinitely. In the previous chapter, I have reviewed the creative difficulties Beckett encountered while writing the play La Dernière bande. One may hypothesize that Beckett had exhausted the new possibilities afforded him by writing in French. If this was the case, a fortuitous request from the BBC for an English language radio play provided him with a new direction and renewed creativity and enthusiasm. Beckett’s own anecdote about his inspiration for the play reveals a telling

detail. In the letter to Nancy Cunard, Beckett writes, "...in the dead of t'other night got a nice gruesome idea...." The inspiration for this work arrived either in sleep or a period of insomnia but certainly not as a result of some supreme mental effort of the sort La Dernière bande or the translation of L'Innommable had required.

Ann Beer, in her book, Beckett's Bilingualism, writes, "During this period, though, a move back towards English became inevitable given the relentless advance of Beckett's fame after the staging of En Attendant Godot."<sup>44</sup> She goes on to explain that the English-speaking audience that had eluded him early on in his career was now forming and implies that for this reason, he returned to English. I strongly disagree; Beckett was never one to write for any particular audience or public. It is my contention instead that creative difficulties at the end of the French period paired with an unexpected request from the BBC, brought Beckett back to English. Beer overlooks these important factors in her essay and does not directly take on the question of why Beckett would return to English after such a prolific period in French.

Beckett's return to English was thus unforeseen and had profound implications for his writing. Beckett's unceasing efforts, through the use of language, to depict man's suffering and struggle for survival remained intact in spite of the shift back to English. The style of the writing changed dramatically, however, as the influence of music, poetry and biographical details could be felt. I shall demonstrate in the following two chapters that Beckett relied heavily on music for the structure, themes, and elaboration of his play All that Fall. This play also contained a great number of biographical details from his childhood. In the case of Happy Days, the poetry of Dante's Divine Comedy is a major source wherein Beckett found the striking visual images of the partially entombed

protagonist as well as a means of expressing the vulnerability of man's reliance on language through repeated use of the phrase "sweet old style."

In addition, Beckett's depiction of women evolved. In his earlier works the female protagonists were rarely more than shallow sketches of the negative stereotypes of women. These depictions were harsh, unflattering, critical portrayals of women who openly threatened men. The danger of these women rested in their potential to distract men from their more noble artistic pursuits with either sex or love. In the second English period, female characters are fully developed psychologically and face the same difficult existential and linguistic questions of Beckett's earlier male characters. Perhaps some of this shift in attitude toward women is due to the fact that Beckett's later female protagonists are older, more matronly, women in whom many critics have seen affinities with Beckett's mother.

The period of impasse at the end of the French period was broken not only by a linguistic shift to English but also by a shift in medium to radio. Beckett's innovations in his radio plays carried over to his plays for the stage and contributed to his development of female characters who were vastly different from those who had come before. These changes culminated in the play Footfalls, which may be viewed as an example of *écriture féminine*, thanks to its presentation of the mother/daughter relationship and its treatment of the female protagonist and her mother.

The following two chapters are devoted to Beckett's plays All that Fall and Happy Days which will provide detailed examples of the changes in writing style and gender roles that coincide with Beckett's return to English.

### 3.7 Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gontarski, S.E. Beckett's Happy Days: A Manuscript Study. p. 7

<sup>2</sup> Gontarski, S. E., p. 11

<sup>3</sup> Beer, Ann, "No-Man's-Land: Beckett's Bilingualism as Autobiography." p. 173

<sup>4</sup> Beckett, Samuel, Dream of Fair to Middling Women. p. 149

<sup>5</sup> Esslin, Martin Mediations. p. 130

<sup>6</sup> Esslin, Martin Mediations. p. 125

<sup>7</sup> Lyons, Charles R. Samuel Beckett. p. 75

<sup>8</sup> Bair, Deirdre p. 423

<sup>9</sup> Esslin, Martin Mediations. p.125

<sup>10</sup> Kenner, Hugh A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett. London Thames and Hudson LTD, 1973 p. 159

<sup>11</sup> Knowlson, James p. 385

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from original "Beckett Festival of Radio Plays" program

<sup>13</sup> Briggs, Asa The BBC The First Fifty Years New York: Oxford University Press 1985 p. 37

<sup>14</sup> Briggs, Asa p. 230

<sup>15</sup> Briggs, Asa p. 244

<sup>16</sup> Briggs, Asa p. 345

<sup>17</sup> As Quoted in Briggs, Asa p. 346

<sup>18</sup> Briggs, Asa pp. 246-247

<sup>19</sup> Berge, Marit Gallie Samuel Beckett's Radio Plays: Music of the Absurd Oslo, Norway: Hovedoppgave University of Oslo 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Worth, Katharine "Beckett and the Radio Medium" in Drakakis, John. British Radio Drama Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981. p. 192

<sup>21</sup> Esslin, Martin. Mediations p.122

<sup>22</sup> Berge, Marit Gallie. p. 34

<sup>23</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda. p.ix

<sup>24</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda. p. x

<sup>25</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda. p. xi

- <sup>26</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda. p. xi
- <sup>27</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda. p. xiii
- <sup>28</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda p. xi
- <sup>29</sup> Acheson, James "Beckett and the Heresy of Love" in Ben-Zvi, p. 71
- <sup>30</sup> Quoted by Acheson, James. from Beckett, Samuel. "Assumption" in transition 16-17 (June 1929) pp. 268-271 (269)
- <sup>31</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda p. 270
- <sup>32</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda p. 270
- <sup>33</sup> Acheson, James "Beckett and the Heresy of Love" in Ben-Zvi, p. 69
- <sup>34</sup> Acheson, James p. 70
- <sup>35</sup> Brienza, Susan "Clods, Whores, and Bitches: Misogyny in Beckett's Early Fiction" in Ben-Zvi p. 91
- <sup>36</sup> Beckett, Samuel Collected Shorter Plays. 1st hardcover ed. New York: Grove Press, 1984.
- <sup>37</sup> Bryden, Mary. Women in Samuel Beckett's Prose and Drama: Her Own Other. Lanham, MD: Barnes & Noble, 1993. pp. 163-164
- <sup>38</sup> Bryden, Mary. p. 179
- <sup>39</sup> Beckett, Samuel Collected Shorter Plays p. 240
- <sup>40</sup> Bryden, Mary p. 187
- <sup>41</sup> Bryden, Mary p. 241
- <sup>42</sup> Quoted in Bryden, Mary p. 190
- <sup>43</sup> Bryden, Mary p.192
- <sup>44</sup> Beer, Ann. "Beckett's Bilingualism." The Cambridge Companion to Beckett. Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cctl). Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1996. 209-21. p 213

## CHAPTER 4. BECKETT'S ALL THAT FALL

In this chapter I will continue to examine Beckett's bilingualism by focusing on one particularly important work, the play All that Fall. I will show that Beckett's return to English after ten years of composing new works almost exclusively in French has a profound impact on his work and that this play is an excellent example of that impact. Beckett's juvenilia and early professional writing placed him squarely in the English tradition. The switch to French facilitated Beckett's development of his mature style. This style is characterized by a complex philosophical exploration of both writing and the human condition. Beckett explores what it means both to live and experience the world and what it means to undertake to convey this in writing.

The mature French style differs sharply from what comes out of the period I refer to as the return to English. These differences raise many questions, for example, whether there is a unifying purpose/project common to all Beckett's work. If so, why does his focus change when he begins to compose again in English? Do personal relationships, in particular, Beckett's relationship with his mother, influence the writing? Why does Beckett seemingly embrace the "poetry" of English he so strongly rejected earlier in his life? This chapter will attempt to provide answers to these questions.

I will begin with an analysis of the plot structure of All that Fall, which is divided into three sections or movements. I choose to use the musical term because music and the music of language are so important in this work meant for radio. These three movements recount Maddy Rooney's journey to and from the Boghill train station to pick up her husband, Dan. I will also discuss the major themes developed in this play and how the circular structure of the play serves to highlight them.



In the second section of this chapter I will discuss the distinct Irish flavor of the play. It is set in what could be any small Irish town, the characters all have Irish names, and the language they use is characterized by Irish expressions and slang. This feature of the play is important because it represents a shift back to the recognizable locations and language that Beckett had stripped away from his writing during the French period. And not only does he return to Ireland in this work, he returns to the Ireland of his youth by including numerous biographical references that critics, particularly James Knowlson, have revealed.

I will discuss in detail two major themes of the play, death and decay. I include this discussion to contrast the preceding one and analyze a theme found elsewhere in Beckett's work. In this way I hope to bring to light both what changes in Beckett's writing when he returns to English and what remains constant. I will demonstrate that Beckett, in developing this theme, is able to create an equally arresting image of life in spite of writing in English, including biographical details, and basing the entire work heavily on music.

In the following section I will fully analyze the influence of music on the play. In the opening scene the protagonist (and the listener) hear Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" playing in an old house in the distance. This is an important detail that gives a clue as to the overall structure of the play. In this section I will compare the form of the sonata with the structure of Beckett's play and trace the parallels that exist between Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" and Beckett's All that Fall.

Sections five and six will take up the issue of gender in this play. First, I will discuss Mrs. Rooney and her various roles of mother, daughter, and lover. I will explore

this female protagonist's extraordinary depth of character that is in such sharp contrast to Beckett's earlier female characters. Second, I will discuss one probable biographical detail in the play that links Mrs. Rooney and Beckett's mother.

This chapter will argue in conclusion that Beckett's return to English with the radio play All that Fall ushers in stylistic elements previously suppressed in his work. The distinct Irish setting, numerous biographical references, and musically based structure of the play are all related to the return to English. Also, Beckett's mother is evoked in this play unlike in his earlier works. This does not mean, however, that certain recurring themes such as death and decay disappear. Indeed, these core themes found in almost all of his writing continue to be explored and developed in the second English period.

#### **4.1 Plot Structure: Three Movements**

Beckett's play All that Fall is set in the fictional town of Boghill and though not stated in the text, this is unmistakably Ireland. The play begins with the bucolic sounds of animals, the shuffling of Mrs. Rooney's feet, and the playing far off of Schubert's "Death and the Maiden." Mrs. Rooney, the text informs the reader, is "a lady in her seventies" and despite her age and obesity, she is on her way to the train station to surprise her blind husband, Dan, for his birthday. The entire play may be divided into three separate movements. The first consists of Mrs. Rooney's journey to the train station, while the second is her time spent at the station searching for her husband. The third is the couple's journey home. This play has a definite plot that drives the story forward and develops themes of womanhood, the death of children, and old age.

On her way to meet her husband's train, Mrs. Rooney has a series of three encounters with local villagers, all men. The first person she meets is Christy, the carter. They have a short exchange concerning family, and Christy offers to sell Mrs. Rooney a load of dung. Mrs. Rooney, appalled, declines the offer and becomes emotional when Christy begins to beat his hinny to make her move. Mrs. Rooney looks into the hinny's eyes and begins a long nostalgic monologue that recounts the various disappointments in her life. At the end of her speech, just before she moves on, she says, "There is that lovely laburnum again." (14) What might first seem an unimportant detail serves as a subtle landmark in the play, for Mrs. Rooney will mention it again later.

Mrs. Rooney next meets Mr. Tyler, the retired bill-broker. He arrives on his bicycle and stops to chat for a few minutes. Their conversation also centers on family and the diverse misfortunes of their friends and neighbors. However, here Mrs. Rooney becomes more playful and the two begin to flirt. Mr. Tyler, who had pumped his tire firm before departing, now finds his rear tire flat. He departs cursing and riding on the rim.

The final meeting comes with Mr. Slocum, the clerk of the local racecourse, who arrives in his car and stops to enquire whether Mrs. Rooney is all right, as he sees her bent double. The two have a short exchange similar to the previous ones enquiring about the health of family. Mr. Slocum then offers her a lift and her ensuing attempts to get in the car are a comedy of errors. Once she is aboard, Mr. Slocum attempts to start the car but fails. It has gone dead. He chokes the engine and finally succeeds in starting it up and the two finish the journey to the station. When they arrive, Mrs. Rooney has just as much

difficulty descending from the car as she had getting in. Tommy, a boy who works at the station, helps her.

These meetings make up the first movement of the play and are notable for the varied themes they develop through repetition. I will discuss the theme of death and decay that runs through the play at length below but one important element of this theme is already evident: locomotion. One of the first sounds the listener hears is that of Mrs. Rooney's shuffling feet. From here Beckett introduces gradually more sophisticated forms of travel. Christy also walks but could easily ride in his cart. Mr. Tyler travels by bicycle and Mr. Slocum has an automobile. Yet, despite the increasing technological innovation of each form of travel, they all are beset with problems. Christy must whip the hinny to make her go, Mr. Tyler's tire goes flat, and Mr. Slocum's engine dies. These are all subtle variations on the same theme that lend the play the musical quality of variations on a theme. This also will be discussed at greater length below.

In general, the first movement is characterized by calm, solitude, and individual encounters with others. Mrs. Rooney's feet shuffle as she makes her way to the station and comments on the good weather and pleasing scenery. The road represents danger, for she fears being hit by Mr. Tyler's bicycle and is aghast when Mr. Slocum runs over a hen. She even imagines what it would be like, saying, "What a death! One minute picking happy at the dung, on the road, in the sun, with now and then a dust bath, and then – bang! – all her troubles over." (19) In spite of this danger, she negotiates the road successfully and arrives at the station, where the mood of the play will change dramatically.

The second movement of the play begins when Mrs. Rooney arrives at the station and meets Tommy and Mr. Barrell, the stationmaster. Mr. Barrell chats with Mrs. Rooney at the foot of the grueling ascent of the steps of the station and the two discuss the now familiar topics of family and health. At this point they realize the train is late and Mrs. Rooney remarks the weather is changing. She says, "The wind is getting up. [*Pause. Wind.*] The best of the day is over. [*Pause. Wind. Dreamily*] Soon the rain will begin to fall and go on falling, all afternoon." (21) Just as there is a shift in activity in this movement, there is a corresponding worsening of the weather.

Mrs. Rooney then spies an acquaintance with the wonderfully Beckettian name "Miss Fitt," who is indeed a striking example of a misfit. When the two speak, Miss Fitt launches into a long explanation of her bizarre inability to recognize people or concentrate on normal activities because she is so "distray." (22) Mrs. Rooney asks Miss Fitt to help her up the stairs, which she calls, "the face of this cliff." (23) During the ascent, Mrs. Rooney again compares the stairs to a mountain, this time the Matterhorn. She also begins singing a song but can only remember a few of the words.

At this point Mrs. Rooney's overhears a woman and her daughter making fun of her. Several characters speak in quick progression one after another. In a short time Miss Fitt, Mrs. Rooney, Mr. Tyler, A Female Voice, Dolly, and Mr. Barrell all speak. Mrs. Rooney makes it to the top of the stairs. A Female Voice warns her daughter of the danger of standing too close to the tracks. She tells her daughter, "Give me your hand and hold me tight, one can be sucked under." (25) Mrs. Rooney and Miss Fitt discuss the late train and speculate why it might be late. Miss Fitt fears it has been derailed and some harm has come to her mother.

After a few minutes the up mail arrives with a surge of loud noise and activity. The text specifies, “[*Immediately exaggerated station sounds. Falling signals. Bells. Whistles. Crescendo of train whistle approaching. Sound of train rushing through station.*]” (27) Next, the 12.30 arrives and is described thus, “[*The up mail recedes, the down train approaches, enters the station, pulls up with great hissing of steam and clashing of couplings. Noise of passengers descending, doors banging, Mr. Barrell shouting “Boghill! Boghill!”*, etc. *Piercingly.*]” (27) All the passengers descend in a flurry.

Mrs. Rooney finally finds her husband who has been in the men’s room. She asks Jerry about his father and learns he has been taken away, leaving the boy all alone in the world. The couple pay the boy and prepare to make the journey home. In the course of their conversation Mr. Rooney makes a remarkable comment. He says, “Once and for all, do not ask me to speak and move at the same time. I shall not say this in this life again.” (29) Next, the couple descend the “precipice” as Mr. Rooney calls the stairs. He remarks that after descending them thousands of times he still does not know how many there are. He asks his wife’s opinion and when she declines to count them he is shocked. He says, “Not count! One of the few satisfactions in life!” (30) The couple reaches the bottom and begins the journey home.

This movement distinguishes itself from what comes before and what follows in several important ways. The landscape changes from the flat and wide-open country roads to the condensed man-made space of the train station. While Mrs. Rooney earlier had dealings with one person at a time, now she will face crowds at the station. This shift is also evident in the development of the theme of problems with locomotion/travel

already noted. Mrs. Rooney, on her way up the steps, evokes two doomed vessels, the Titanic and the Lusitania, that were responsible for the deaths of thousands. Of course, another example central to the play is the late train. These examples demonstrate that the theme has expanded to include mass modes of travel. Also, the level of danger has intensified from the machine merely breaking down to something much more menacing, the risk of death of the individual and the masses.

The steep steps are a daunting barrier that demarcates the two spaces. Several critics believe that the steps recall Mt. Purgatory in Dante's Purgatory. This theory finds support in Mrs. Rooney's repeated comparisons of the steps to a mountain. There is also a direct reference to Dante in the first movement that has gone largely unnoticed by critics. It comes when Mrs. Rooney is speaking with Mr. Tyler and the latter says, "Nothing, Mrs. Rooney, nothing, I was merely cursing, under my breath, God and man, under my breath, and the wet Saturday afternoon of my conception." (15) This line seems likely to have come from Canto III of the Inferno when Dante describes the cries of the condemned souls with which Charon loads his ferry to cross the Acheron. Dante writes, "They cursed God, their parents, the human race, the place, the time, the seed of their begetting and of their birth." (Inferno 31) Subtle allusions to Dante are common in Beckett's writing, so this does not necessarily indicate any deeper structural or thematic parallel between the two works.

The steps may be a reference to Dante's Purgatory but their chief importance is to physically set apart the central episode of the play and clearly differentiate it from the journeys that precede and follow it. The space changes from natural to man-made, and

the weather shifts from fair to stormy. The weather will continue to worsen for the rest of the day. This is another aspect of the theme of decline and decay that pervades the play.

The train station is characterized by frenetic activity, confusion, and noise. It begins early with Mr. Slocum blowing his horn to call Tommy and continues when Mr. Barrell yells at the boy, “Nip up there on the platform now and whip out the truck! Won’t the twelve thirty be on top of us before we can turn round?” (20) These lines evoke the child’s quickness and agility in contrast to the labored, slow movement of Mrs. Rooney and the men she has met thus far. The noise of the station builds to a crescendo first, with many characters speaking at the same time or one after another and second, when the train arrives. Confusion surrounds the train’s delay and, once it arrives, Dan Rooney’s whereabouts.

The third and final movement begins once Dan and Maddy Rooney have descended the steps and begun the journey home. They discuss the worsening weather and Mr. Rooney says he wants to hurry home so Mrs. Rooney can read to him. He also imagines what retired life would be like. The thought of sitting at home counting the hours between meals energizes him, and he wants to use this burst of strength to get home.

Neighborhood children interrupt the couple’s journey with taunts, and Mr. Rooney scares them off with his cane. Here, the conversation takes a morbid turn. Mr. Rooney asks his wife, “Did you ever wish to kill a child? [*Pause.*] Nip some young doom in the bud.” (31)

The conversation changes abruptly with another direct reference to Dante. Mr. Rooney suggests to his wife that they continue their journey walking backwards. He says,



“Yes. Or you forwards and I backwards. The perfect pair. Like Dante’s damned, with their faces arsy-versy. Our tears will water our bottoms.” (31)

As the couple continues home Mr. Rooney evokes his courtship and marriage of Mrs. Rooney. Each major event such as proposal, wedding, etc., is marked by a worsening decline in his health. Mrs. Rooney comments on their peaceful pastoral surroundings, when, unprovoked by his wife, Mr. Rooney returns to the subject of the train delay. Mr. Rooney would like to sit and talk but since there is no bench around they must continue.

Mr. Rooney recounts that the train left on time and in the first part of the journey he turned over in his mind the benefits and drawbacks of taking his retirement. He says he noticed the train had stopped but at this point his wife interrupts him, complaining about the wind and the cold. When she tries to encourage him, he mocks her, saying, “Never pause....safe to haven....Do you know, Maddy, sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language.” (34) Mr. Rooney resumes his story and says that for some time he thought the train was in a station. He realized his error as the delay grew longer. Eventually, the train simply departed and the next thing he knew he was getting down at Boghill Station.

Shortly after, Mrs. Rooney repeats a line from the first movement when she says, “There is that lovely laburnum again. Poor thing, it is losing all its tassels.” (36) The couple moves on slowly with Winnie recalling thoughts from the first movement. Mr. Rooney stops and it is clear that the couple is soaked from the rain. They hear music in the distance and it is Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden.” Mrs. Rooney notices Mr. Rooney is crying.

At this point Jerry runs up to the couple, panting. He tells them that Mr. Barrell has sent him to return something Mr. Rooney dropped. Mrs. Rooney takes the object and asks her husband what it is. He becomes very defensive and denies it is his at first. Mrs. Rooney says only it is like a ball but not a ball. Mr. Rooney remains defensive and says violently that it is a thing which he carries about. Before Jerry leaves, Mrs. Rooney asks him if he knows what caused the train's delay. Mr. Rooney becomes agitated and tells his wife the boy knows nothing. He then becomes upset and groans when Jerry tells Mrs. Rooney that a little child fell out of a carriage and onto the tracks under the wheels. The play ends with the sounds of dragging feet, wind, and rain.

The third movement takes the play away from the chaos and activity of the train station episode and back to the calm of the first movement. This movement is remarkable for the symmetry it gives the play as a whole. The major events and themes of the first movement have counterparts in the third movement that serve to balance the play. In the first movement Mrs. Rooney complains about the difficulty of using language and how her words sound "bizarre." In the third movement, her husband tells her she speaks as if she were using a dead language. Mr. Rooney himself struggles to walk and talk at the same time. Here the parallel themes of language and locomotion converge. The couple will have an encounter in the third movement just as Mrs. Rooney had encounters on her journey. However, this time it will be with children, and the meeting will foreshadow the revelation at the end of the play. Another example of symmetry is the reference to Dante that corresponds to the joke in the first movement. Dante's sinners are the seers whose punishment is to be forever twisted backwards. In life they tried to see the future and in Hell they are condemned to physically look

backwards. This resonates with readers because Dan, of course, is blind. The last piece of symmetry is the laburnum that Mrs. Rooney admires when she begins her journey in the morning and then comments on again when she is almost home. This plant serves as a landmark in the story. However, when Mrs. Rooney sees it the second time, its condition has worsened and she comments on its deterioration.

In the final movement of the play, the atmosphere grows calm again but also much darker. Just as the storm clouds gather and it begins to rain, Mr. Rooney's comments about killing a child and Mrs. Rooney's anecdote about the ill-fated girl who had "never really been born" add to the theme of the death of children which reaches its climax at the end of the play when Jerry announces the reason for the train's delay, the death of a child. This play shares qualities of circularity and repetition with other of Beckett's works but in new ways. The play is in one act but may be viewed as having three, with the first and third acts repeating themselves in a way similar to that of Waiting for Godot and Happy Days.

#### **4.2 Language: Protagonists' Irish Names and Biographical References**

Beckett's style of names is consistent throughout his writing. During all three periods outlined in this dissertation, letters and puns are important with the occasional literary reference, e.g., Belacqua and Dante in More Pricks than Kicks. One may hypothesize as to the origin of these names and the significance of their recurring letters. The evidence in this regard, however, is scant. Yet one thing is certain, the way Beckett chooses names for his characters changes dramatically with the composition of All that Fall. What sets them apart is that they have traceable origins. This section will discuss these names and argue that they are directly related to Beckett's return to English.

As James Knowlson points out in his book, Damned to Fame, the names Beckett uses in this play are inspired by or the same as those of local people from Beckett's hometown of Foxrock. In the play, the first three men Mrs. Rooney meets are Christy, Mr. Tyler, and Mr. Slocum. Knowlson points out that Christy was the name of a gardener at the Beckett family home, Beckett bought apples from a gardener named Tyler on his walk home from school and Slocum was the maiden name of John Beckett's wife, Vera, as well as James Joyce's bibliographer. Foxrock's stationmaster was named Mr. Joseph Farrell, a close parallel to Boghill's stationmaster Mr. Barrell. Miss Fitt's name, aside from the wonderful pun, may have been inspired by a classmate of Beckett's at Portora School named E.G. Fitt or of a Rathgar lady resident. Knowlson also claims that Beckett's kindergarten teacher Ida "Jack" Elsner inspires Mrs. Rooney, a common Irish name.<sup>1</sup> Some critics have pointed out that the name Maddy Dunne Rooney may also be a series of puns that trace the theme of decay in the work meaning "mad," "done," and "ruined." Even when modelling his characters on real people, there is no reason to expect Beckett to completely give up his predilection for word games based on the theme of decay and decrepitude.

Furthermore, images from Beckett's youth are incorporated directly into the play. Indeed, a cottager driving a horse and cart with a load of dung to sell for gardens was a familiar sight in Foxrock. The cab evoked in the text, "send Tommy for the cab" parallels a cab that was kept near the Foxrock station. "Connolly's Van," which kicks up a cloud of dust in the text, came from Connolly's Stores in the nearby village of Cornelscourt. At one point in the play Mr. and Mrs. Rooney discuss a certain preacher

named Hardy. Indeed there was one Reverend E. Hardy who was a close neighbor of the Becketts on Kerrymount Avenue when Samuel was a child.<sup>2</sup>

These names, almost without exception, are those of people Beckett knew during his childhood. The reader may ask the question: why does Beckett suddenly change course after years of making efforts to strip the biographical details out of his work in order to universalize their meaning? I believe that the answer to this question can be found if one studies another important feature of the play that is also one of Beckett's key concerns throughout his writing, language.

All that Fall is remarkable not only for its geographic similarity to Foxrock and its borrowed proper names, but also for its *Irish* colloquial English, the English of Beckett's childhood. Mrs. Rooney says, "surely to goodness," and "to be sure," phrases that have a distinctive Irish ring to them. Christy, the carter she meets on her way to the station, says his hinny is, "very fresh in herself today," another typically Irish phrase. The use of familiar and uncomplicated language that characterizes this play marks a distinctive (Irish) location and evokes a sense of everyday life. Early in the text when she is talking to Christy, the carter, Mrs. Rooney makes some very telling remarks about her own use of language. She says, "Do you find anything...bizarre about my way of speaking? (Pause.) I do not mean the voice. (Pause.) No, I mean the words. (Pause. More to herself.) I use none but the simplest words, I hope, and yet I sometimes find my way of speaking very...bizarre. (Pause.) Mercy! What was that?"<sup>3</sup> She begins by asking Christy what he thinks of her "way of speaking" and then clarifies her question with two qualifications: the first is that she is not concerned with the sound of her voice and the second is that she specifically means the words she uses. At this point she becomes introspective and

captivated by her own question. She states her intention to use only the simplest words and is surprised that this does not keep her from sounding “bizarre.” Then, in characteristically Beckettian manner, a mule’s fart wakes her from her reverie.

This short section of text forms a microcosm of many different linguistic concerns that appear throughout Beckett’s writing and are directly related to this study. First, Mrs. Rooney’s remarks strongly recall Beckett’s own attempts to pare down his language by writing in French. Mrs. Rooney searches for the simplest, most clear language but understands that ultimately, language is an inadequate tool with which to express herself. This may be viewed as another in a long series of episodes in which Beckett’s characters’ struggle to use language to both for self-knowledge and to interact with others. Like Mrs. Rooney, Beckett switches to French to simplify his use of language in order to create a more focused prose that would achieve his goal of universalizing the meaning of his works.

When Beckett returns to English, however, those qualities of language he had sought to eradicate from his writing, he embraces. All the elements that disappear during the French period – autobiography, geographical location, poetry and music, return like never before in his writing. Perhaps, like Winnie in All that Fall, Beckett realizes that attempts to “simplify” language are illusory and doomed to failure. Beckett is still able to universalize his themes and concerns in this work primarily by focusing on the individual and the very specific details of her existence. It is precisely by way of the many details that Beckett provides regarding the characters and their environment that he is able to create a world to which almost anyone can relate.

### 4.3 Familiar Themes: Collapse and Decay

The central themes of All that Fall, such as collapse, decay, and death, also appear in many other works by Beckett and are by now familiar. This aspect of Beckett's writing serves as a bridge across his linguistic shifts and remains unchanged throughout his career. Beckett's approach and methods for developing these themes does, however, change, and studying the variations from one work to another and from one period to another can reveal much about the writing. These themes are particularly strong in All that Fall. They inform almost every detail in this work, and as such, they merit review.

To begin with, Mrs. Rooney is old, overweight, and in poor health. She suffers from rheumatism and her husband, Dan, is blind. Before she speaks, the listener hears the laborious shuffling of her feet. Her first words include "poor woman" and "ruinous old house." The listener also hears Schubert's similarly themed "Death and the Maiden" playing in the distance. The first meeting Mrs. Rooney has is with Christy, whose cart is full of dung and pulled by an impotent hinny. Mrs. Rooney asks about his "poor" wife, and Christy replies that she is "no better." When the conversation turns to the weather, Christy remarks that it is a "nice day for the races" and Mrs. Rooney immediately retorts, "But will it hold up?" (12) When the two part, Mrs. Rooney grows introspective after looking into the hinny's eyes. She laments her lost love and lost child, a daughter named Minnie. This reference foreshadows the death of a child at the end of the play and alluded to in the title.

Mrs. Rooney's next meeting is with Mr. Tyler. Mrs. Rooney asks him about his "poor" daughter. Mr. Tyler replies that she has had to have an abortion and he is now left "grandchildless." This is the second reference to the death of a child and continues to

build the theme toward the denouement of the play. When Connolly's van thunders by and nearly runs them over, Mrs. Rooney compares the dangers of being abroad to staying at home. She concludes that the former threatens a violent death while the latter promises a "lingering dissolution." (15) Like Christy before him, Mr. Tyler's only optimistic comments are made about the weather. He says, "Ah in spite of all it is a blessed thing to be alive in such weather, and out of hospital." (16) The qualification "out of hospital" is humorous and, of course, undercuts the optimism. Mr. Tyler backtracks when Mrs. Rooney questions him and offers, "half alive." But she is having none of it and says, "I am not half alive nor anything approaching it." (16) Mrs. Rooney is once again overcome with emotion and says she cannot go on. She laments her lost daughter Minnie again and imagines what she would be like if she were still alive. Ironically, even this fantasy is imbued with the effects of age on the body for she envisions Minnie preparing for menopause. Mr. Tyler leaves and Mrs. Rooney again remarks on dissolution when she says, "...oh to be in atoms, in atoms!" (17)

Mr. Slocum arrives and fears something is wrong with Mrs. Rooney when he sees her bent double. When the two begin speaking, the conversation inevitably turns to family and Mrs. Rooney enquires after his "poor" mother. This question rounds out the theme of a woman's various roles in life. To sum up, it begins with Mrs. Rooney's first words, "Poor woman." (12) and continues when she uses the same adjective, poor, with the succession of daughter, wife, and mother when speaking with the men she meets on the road to the station. Gender in this play will be further discussed below.

The theme of decay is also developed through the various means of transportation that are presented in the first movement of the play. This has already been discussed and



merits only noting here. One other detail that bears repeating is that when Mr. Slocum succeeds in starting his car, the first thing he does is run over a hen. This is important for being the first death in the play and foreshadowing the main offstage event.

When Mrs. Rooney arrives at the station, she meets Mr. Barrell, who remarks on her recovery from a recent illness. Mrs. Rooney replies, “Would I were lying stretched out in my comfortable bed, Mr. Barrell, just wasting slowly, painlessly away, keeping up my strength with arrowroot and calves-foot jelly, till in the end you wouldn’t see me under the blankets any more than a board.” (20-21) Here, again Mrs. Rooney repeats her desire for a slow dissolution of her being. When Mrs. Rooney discusses family with Mr. Barrell, as she has with all her previous interlocutors, the latter speaks of his father, who did not live long enough to enjoy his retirement. This marks a change from the earlier theme, as the family member in question is male this time. However, the overarching theme of death and decay is maintained.

Mrs. Rooney next remarks that the wind is getting up and that, “The best of the day is over.” (21) Mrs. Rooney comments that soon it will begin to rain and continue raining all afternoon. She continues, “Then at evening the clouds will part, the setting sun will shine an instant, then sink, behind the hills.” (22) This phrase is remarkable for its poetic imagery but also for its similarity to the description of the birth astride a grave in Waiting for Godot. Once again, the idea is that the best of life only lasts an instant before darkness consumes it once more.

When Mrs. Rooney meets Miss Fitt, the pair discuss her inability to recognize her neighbors. This name is an excellent pun on “misfit,” which describes the character quite well. Miss Fitt explains, “I suppose the truth is I am not there, Mrs. Rooney, just not

really there at all.” (23) Here is an example of a woman who is so spiritually decayed as to hardly exist at all. This conversation is also a precursor to Mrs. Rooney’s story of the mind doctor in the third movement, which I will discuss below.

When the train finally arrives, Mrs. Rooney finds her husband, who is led by a boy named Jerry. As is her custom, Mrs. Rooney asks about the boy’s family and learns that his father has been taken away. Apparently, he has already lost his mother, for she calls him an orphan. This exchange presents a reversal of the theme of the death of children and childlessness by exploring its opposite, the loss of parents and ensuing state of being an orphan.

The reader learns that it is Mr. Rooney’s birthday and that he no longer remembers his age. He seems to think he may die at any moment for he tells Jerry, “Come for me on Monday, if I am still alive.” (28) Mr. Rooney shows his weakness and ill health when he implores his wife not to ask him to speak and walk at the same time. Mr. Rooney has energy for one or the other but not both.

The weather continues to worsen and when Mr. Rooney asks about it, his wife describes the day thus, “Shrouding, shrouding the best of it is past.” (29) The same could easily be said of the protagonists and most of the characters who have appeared thus far. The theme of the worsening weather steadily progresses. Soon it will begin to rain just as Mrs. Rooney has predicted and she and her husband will arrive home thoroughly soaked.

Mr. Rooney briefly considers retiring and envisions life without work, “Sit at home on the remnants of my bottom counting the hours – till the next meal.”(30) His comments are filled with pessimism and black humor. Eventually, Mrs. Rooney asks her husband if he is well and his reply evokes a lifetime of unremitting suffering and

disappointment. Dan says, “Well! Did you ever know me to be well? The day you met me I should have been in bed. The day you proposed to me the doctors gave me up. You knew that, did you not? The night you married me they came for me with an ambulance. (...) The loss of my sight was a great fillip. If I could go deaf and dumb I think I might pant on to be a hundred.” (32) His sarcasm is biting as he equates what are normally the most important and happiest moments in life, falling in love and marriage, with progressing illness. He comes to the ironic and humorous conclusion that his declining health is somehow responsible for his longevity.

Mr. Rooney explains that on the ride home he catalogued his income and the expenses required to keep him “alive and twitching” and came to the unexpected conclusion that he could add considerably to his income if he just stayed home indefinitely. He concludes, “Business, old man, I said, retire from business, it has retired from you.” (33) His dreams of wasting away to nothing in his bed recall his wife’s similar comments earlier in the play. He then thought of the drawbacks of living at home, including cleaning and dealing with the neighbor’s brats, and began to reconsider. His basement office allowed him to be “buried alive” for most of the day with access to ale and a fillet of hake. This, he thought, was a more desirable situation. He says, “Nothing, I said, not even fully certified death, can ever take the place of that.”(34)

The idea of death is brought up again quickly, but this time it is in regard to language. Mrs. Rooney complains of being cold and the wind cutting through her clothes. She encourages herself by saying she and her husband will go directly home without pause and be “safe to haven.” Dan is struck by this unusual turn of phrase and tells his wife, “Never pause... safe to haven.... Do you know, Maddy, sometimes one

would think you were struggling with a dead language.” (34) His wife replies, “Yes indeed, Dan, I know full well what you mean, I often have that feeling, it is unspeakably excruciating.” (34) This dialogue recalls Mrs. Rooney’s earlier complaint that her words sounded “bizarre” and highlight her struggle to express herself through language. The theme of the decline of language intensifies when Mrs. Rooney brings up a familiar dead language when she says, “Well, you know, it will be dead in time, just like our own poor dear Gaelic, there is that to be said.” (34)

Mr. Rooney completes the story of his train ride without divulging the reason for the delay. When he asks his wife if she believes his account, she launches into a story about attending the lecture of a “mind doctor.” She retells the story of the doctor’s unsuccessful attempts to treat an unhappy little girl over the course of three years. Although he could find nothing wrong with her, she grew sicker over time and eventually died. One comment haunted her ever since. The doctor exclaimed, “The trouble with her was she had never really been born!” (36) This story is important because it seems out of place in the play as a whole. It marks a break from the couple’s earlier conversation and does not seem relevant nor does it follow logically from Mr. Rooney’s explanation of his train ride. Thematically, however, the story fits in perfectly because it builds the theme of death and decay by recounting the slow decline of a child. It also serves to foreshadow the death of the child that is the reason for the train’s delay.

Several more details develop the theme, for example, when Mr. Rooney believes there is a dead dog in the ditch. His wife explains that he smells the rotting leaves collected in the ditch year after year. In this way she expands the duration of the theme by associating it with the natural cycle of the seasons and evoking the build-up of rotting

material over many years. She also notes the same laburnum she commented on earlier in the play. However, now she says, “Poor thing, it is losing all its tassels.” This detail shows an example of decline during the relatively short duration of the play and serves as a landmark that indicates the couple is almost home. Her use of the adjective “poor” also ties this detail to Mrs. Rooney’s earlier conversations with passers-by in which she used this adjective to enquire after the ill family members of her neighbors.

Mrs. Rooney also imagines Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a hinny. This humorous mistake is a prelude to the couple’s reaction to the title of the next day’s sermon. When Mrs. Rooney notices Dan is crying, she changes the subject and tells her husband its title, “The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down.” [*Silence. They join in wild laughter. They move on. Wind and rain. Dragging feet, etc.*] (38) The sermon’s title provides the play’s title and resultant play on words. This quote recalls a biblical passage but also refers to the child who has fallen to his death. The full quote also echoes the many people who refer to Mrs. Rooney as “bent double.” One is left to wonder why the Lord has not saved the child nor alleviated Mrs. Rooney’s pain. Perhaps, this is why she and her husband laugh wildly: it is the best reaction to a life of unending misery in a world devoid of any God.

#### **4.4 Beckett and Schubert, Death and the Maiden**

Marit Gallie Berge has pointed out in her unpublished thesis at the University of Oslo, “Samuel Beckett’s Radio Plays: Music of the Absurd,” the structural importance of Schubert’s sonata, “Death and the Maiden”, in All that Fall.<sup>4</sup> As has already been noted, this piece of music marks the beginning and end of the play and is referred to by name in the work. Berge has argued convincingly in her thesis that Beckett may have structured

the play around the musical form of the sonata and specifically, Schubert's sonata. Berge devotes most of her attention to the technical aspects of Beckett's work and how he creates a soundscape in what is for him a new medium. The first chapter of her work is devoted to the technological innovations in radio and at the BBC during the years leading up to the production of All that Fall. In the second chapter she discusses how the various animal sounds were created as well as the effect of having the microphone follow Mrs. Rooney through her journey. When she addresses the themes of suffering, pain, and death present in All that Fall, she employs a biographical approach and suggests the source of these themes is to be found in certain traumatic events of Beckett's childhood. Berge, however, fails to explore the importance of the title of Schubert's sonata, "Death and the Maiden" in relation to Beckett's play. Thus, she underestimates the significance of a possible medieval source for the play. Before any consideration of the long tradition of the dance of death, it is worthwhile here to review the sonata as a musical form and gauge its possible significance in Beckett's play.

The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music defines the sonata thus, "A piece of music, almost invariably instrumental and usually in several movements, for a soloist or a small ensemble; or a structural principle, the sonata form."<sup>5</sup> The same dictionary describes the sonata form as, "The main form of the group embodying the 'sonata principle', the most important principle of musical structure from the Classical period to the 20th century: that material first stated in a complementary key be restated in the home key."<sup>6</sup> The dictionary traces the development of the sonata from its inception in the late sixteenth century through the twentieth century. The earliest meaning of "'sonata'" was

simply instrumental music and was used to distinguish between this type of music and songs to be sung or “cantata.”

The original sonata consisted of a single movement but by the time of Corelli (1653-1713), the genre had evolved to include several separate movements that followed the pattern slow-fast-slow in tempo. Over time, the sonata continued to develop until there was no consistent trend in the number or order of movements. The alternating pattern between slow and fast movements was maintained, as was the sonata principle of repetition. In the twentieth century the genre lost the qualities that had earlier defined it and the term “sonata” no longer implied a work of multiple movements with one or more in sonata form.<sup>7</sup> The essential characteristics of the sonata, including the alternation between slow and fast movements, along with the principle of repetition and multiple variations on a theme, seem to have greatly influenced Beckett in the composition of his play.

In Beckett’s play one can hear many musical principles at work, especially those of the sonata. As Berge has noted, the animal sounds that precede Mrs. Rooney’s first words establish the four-beat measure, which remains consistent throughout the play by way of Mrs. Rooney’s shuffling steps. Other sounds, like Mrs. Rooney’s panting, are added on the first and third beats. After Mrs. Rooney hears “Death and the Maiden” and the sound of the music has been faded out, she begins to hum the tune herself to the time of her shuffling feet.<sup>8</sup> These examples demonstrate that Beckett’s play progresses to the beat of music and, like the sonata, contains variations on a theme.

During the first movement, the tempo is slow, as evidenced by Mrs. Rooney’s labored breathing, slow walking, and frequent stops. She begins the journey alone with

only the sounds of the countryside and those she makes walking and humming. She meets three men on her way to the train station and with each meeting, sounds begin to build in intensity and volume. With Christy, a mule's fart wakes her from her reverie while Mr. Tyler's bicycle bell startles her and Mr. Slocum's car engine roars to life. Variations on a single theme multiply as Mrs. Rooney repeats similar conversations about ailing family members with each of the men she meets and all three have some trouble with their increasingly complex modes of travel. This movement corresponds to a slow opening movement of a sonata that gradually builds toward the fast tempo of the second movement.

When Mrs. Rooney arrives at the station, the tempo increases as Tommy runs from one end of the station to the other and a multitude of voices can be heard interrupting and shouting over one another. Mrs. Rooney's silence acts as a counterpoint to the heightened noise and activity. She says, "Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on." (25) The climax of this movement comes when the up mail and the down train pull into the station with the thundering noise of clashing metal. Dan maintains the four-beats-to-the-bar meter by tapping his cane. Berge also points out that the contrast between the train's crashing noise and the blind man's tapping cane underline man's weakness and frailty.<sup>9</sup>

The couple's return home reestablishes the slow tempo of the first movement with the couple's shuffling steps, heavy breathing, and frequent stops. It is too great an effort for Dan to walk and speak at the same time, so the two often stop. The couple only meets the Lynch twins, who jeer at them on the way home. This is a variation on the theme of children that runs through the play and serves as the impetus for Dan's first remarks



about killing a child. Another example of multiple variations on a theme is Dan's repeated counting of steps and cataloguing of the pros and cons of retiring.

It is worthwhile to review Franz Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" because this sonata is heard twice in Beckett's play and mentioned by name. A comparison of the music with the text, however, reveals little more than what has already been noted with regard to tempo and variations. Perhaps the title itself and the history of this work may lead to a better understanding of why Beckett chose this particular piece of music to include in his play.

The limited scope of this dissertation does not allow for an examination of Franz Schubert's biography. Although Beckett and Schubert have much in common, including early failures, dark themes, and a lifelong commitment to their respective arts, I shall limit the present study to Schubert's sonata which composed near the end of his life and called "Death and the Maiden."

Andrew Clements, in his article for The Guardian entitled "Schubert: Death and the Maiden," writes that the composer achieved his greatest success with the sonata form only in his last three string quartets.<sup>10</sup> In particular, Schubert's work composed in 1824 in D minor, "Death and the Maiden," is by far the most famous. Clements recounts that Schubert's sonata had its origin in a work by the same title he had composed seven years previously. The earlier version forms the basis for the series of variations found in the second movement of the later work. Clements writes, "That reference makes explicit the overriding theme of the work, its bleak vision and almost unremitting foreboding, though the variations themselves provide the only moments of solace in the entire piece."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this strongly recalls the atmosphere of Beckett's play and Mrs. Rooney's dark

remarks about suffering, old age, and death. However, to reach a better understanding of the intersection of these two works and their possible influence on Beckett, one must first consider an important element of the first version of "Death and the Maiden," the text which Schubert set to music.

Schubert's earlier song was inspired by a poem written by Matthias Claudius.

The following is the original German text with an English translation by Emily Ezust.

Der Tod und das Mädchen

Das Mädchen:

"Vorüber! ach, vorüber!  
Geh, wilder Knochenmann!  
Ich bin noch jung, geh, Lieber!  
Und rühre mich nicht an."

Der Tod:

"Gib deine Hand, du schön und zart Gebild',  
Bin Freund und komme nicht zu strafen.  
Sei gutes Muts! Ich bin nicht wild,  
Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen."

Death and the Maiden

The Maiden:

"It's all over! alas, it's all over now!  
Go, savage man of bone!  
I am still young - go, please!  
And do not molest me."

Death:

"Give me your hand, you fair and tender form!  
I am a friend; I do not come to punish.  
Be of good cheer! I am not savage.  
You shall sleep gently in my arms."

This poem, which first inspired Schubert and gave him the name for his later sonata, is striking and immediately evokes an image which fits neatly into the long artistic tradition that juxtaposes the maiden, symbol of youth, beauty, and life with death

in a macabre dance or embrace. This tradition goes back to the Middle Ages and generally consists of death, in the form of a skeleton, inviting one or more of the living to dance. Those who have been asked usually attempt to decline. There are many examples of the dance of death in painting, sculpture, and the frieze work on churches and in cemeteries. One of the earliest surviving examples is called “La Danse macabre” and is painted on the walls of the Cimetière des Innocents in Paris. This tradition in art is associated with, and perhaps derives from, the story of original sin in the Bible. Once cast out of the Garden of Eden, mortal humankind begins the dance of death. The apocalypse or Judgment Day is also a day of death when the world comes to an end and men either join God in heaven or are condemned to eternal punishment in Hell.

The plague of the 14<sup>th</sup> century also brought this genre to the fore by way of the sheer number of people dying and also because the disease struck all people regardless of religion, wealth, fame, or power. All of Europe’s people stood equal before the Black Death that carried so many of them off. In the early examples of the dance, people representing all stations in life are depicted in hierarchical order from Pope to child. This signifies that death may claim all without exception, from the mightiest to the weakest and from the oldest to the youngest.

Over time, the genre became more narrowly defined as death, still a skeleton, dancing with a beautiful young woman. The meaning of this figure remains the same as before or is perhaps heightened by the juxtaposition of the skeleton, symbol of death and decay, with the symbol of life and fecundity in a young woman. A sketch and painting both titled “Death and the Maiden,” by Edvard Munch are better known examples of the genre.

Beckett incorporates this tradition into his play in order to universalize his themes. The characters, like those Death invites to dance, are all afflicted and subject to die at almost any moment regardless of their age, religion, or station in life. Some of the victims are young, like Mrs. Rooney's lost daughter Minnie and the boy who is killed by the train, or Tommy, whom Mr. Rooney has fantasized about killing. Some victims are old like Mr. Barrell's father and Dan, who wonders aloud if he is a hundred years old. All of the characters are debilitated in some way, including the pious Miss Fitt and the old Rooneys, who mock the idea that God upholds "all that fall."

Beckett's work fits into the "Death and the Maiden" tradition in art quite well. Beckett creates a variation of the motif by humanizing the figure of Death. Mr. Rooney, the implied agent of death in the play, replaces the more abstract idea of death represented as a skeleton. This adds a greater depth to the imagery because now man may assume either the role of Death or the maiden. Beckett also focuses on the very old and the very young in this play. Thus, he underscores the brevity of life by removing the greater part of its duration and considering it only at the beginning and end.

#### **4.5 Gender: Mrs. Rooney and Female as Mother, Daughter, and Lover**

The play opens with Mrs. Rooney saying, "Poor woman. All alone in that ruinous old house."<sup>12</sup> Several of the most important themes of the play are evident in this line: gender, suffering, age, and solitude. This line carries meaning on three levels. It may describe Mrs. Rooney's neighbor, it may describe Mrs. Rooney herself, or it may describe all women. The assonance of 'ruinous' and 'Rooney' add support to the second interpretation.

The first person Mrs. Rooney meets on her journey is Christy, the carter. She enquires about his wife, “How is your poor wife?” (12) and his daughter, “Your daughter then?” (12) Thus begins the references to women that Mrs. Rooney will continue to make throughout the text. She will often enquire about women specifically referred to as mothers, daughters and lovers. Mrs. Rooney compares herself to Christy’s hinny when the animal is slow to move. When Christy beats the animal Mrs. Rooney grows sad and introspective and reflects briefly on her past. This episode is notable for Mrs. Rooney’s yearning for love and apparent mourning of a lost daughter. Minnie, perhaps the deceased child of Mrs. Rooney, is the first of several allusions to a child in the play (and here a dead child) that foreshadows the death of a child at the end of the play.

The next person whom Mrs. Rooney meets is Mr. Tyler. She asks him about his daughter and he replies that he is “grandchildless” as a result of her operation. It is not clear if this is an abortion or some other procedure since Mr. Tyler is vague saying only that they removed the “...whole...er...bag of tricks” (14) The word “grandchildless” echoes Mrs. Rooney’s ‘childlessness’ and is the second reference to a dead child. Mr. Tyler then curses the ‘wet Saturday afternoon of my conception’ (15) and thus evokes the initiation of his own life. Mrs. Rooney laments her lost child once more shouting, “Minnie! Little Minnie!” (16) and remarks that she would now be in her forties and preparing for menopause if she were alive. This comment casts her lost daughter in terms of potential age and (the end of) potential child bearing. As Mr. Tyler is leaving, Mrs. Rooney complains about her corset and shouts after him an indecent invitation to unlace her behind the hedge. These remarks highlight Mrs. Rooney’s sexuality and resonate with Mr. Tyler’s allusion to his conception.

The next passer by that Mrs. Rooney meets is Mr. Slocum. When he sees her she is bent double and he asks if she has a pain in the stomach. This is another subtle reference to pregnancy. Mrs. Rooney asks about Mr. Slocum's mother and he replies that she is "fairly comfortable" (17) and that he manages to keep her out of pain. Mrs. Rooney accepts Mr. Slocum's offer of a ride to the station. She makes sexual innuendos when Mr. Slocum helps her into the car and she is in a compromising position. Mr. Slocum is slow to help her and explains he is stiff. Mrs. Rooney replies, "Stiff! Well I like that! And me heaving all over back and front. [*To herself.*] The dry old reprobate! If that is not suggestive enough Mrs. Rooney giggles and shouts in ecstasy when she finally gets in the car and Mr. Slocum is left panting in exhaustion. The sexual undertone is continued when her dress is ripped in the door. Similar to an adulterer in fear of being found out, Mrs. Rooney wonders aloud what her husband Dan will say when he knows of the hole in her dress.

Mr. Slocum makes a couple of violent remarks when his car will not start. He refers to the car as a female and says she's 'dead' and that perhaps he needs to "choke her." (19) This violence increases when he runs over a hen and Mrs. Rooney says, "Oh, mother, you have squashed her, drive on, drive on!" (19) The two arrive at the station and if Mrs. Rooney's entry to the car was sexual, her exit evokes a difficult childbirth.

Tommy: Crouch down, Mrs. Rooney, crouch down, and get your head in the open.

Mrs. Rooney: Crouch down! At my time of life! This is lunacy!

(...)

Tommy: Now! She's coming! Straighten up, Ma'am! There!  
(All that Fall 20)

Here, Tommy is the midwife who helps extract Mrs. Rooney from the car. The image is striking and comic for its close parallel of childbirth with the most unlikely

actors. Mrs. Rooney, in her conversation with him, reveals that Tommy is an orphan. With this detail Beckett makes a variation on the theme of childlessness by invoking its inverse, the child with no parents.

Mrs. Rooney reveals the center of the play and the turning point of the action when she says the best of the day is over and that it will rain until evening when the weather breaks and the sun will shine for an instant. This image recalls the metaphor used to describe birth and life in Waiting for Godot.

The next person Mrs. Rooney meets is Miss Fitt. She asks if she is invisible and then tells the latter to look closely and “distinguish a once female shape.” The appropriately named Miss Fitt tells the story of an estranged eccentric, a social *misfit*. What characterizes her nonconformity is blindness to social rules. She does not intentionally snub people but is so deep in her thoughts that she does not recognize them. She gets distracted to the point that she says, “...the truth is I am not there, Mrs. Rooney, just not really there at all.” (23) Miss Fitt claims only to see the “big pale blur” that is Mrs. Rooney. The entire play develops the themes of birth/self-knowledge and blindness. In response to this, Mrs. Rooney identifies herself with her maiden name and tells Miss Fitt that her sight is truly piercing.

Miss Fitt helps Mrs. Rooney up the stairs and when they stop another mother/daughter pair is introduced briefly when the mother tells her daughter to look at the pair stuck on the stairs. This theme is furthered when Miss Fitt asks if anyone has seen her mother. Mr. Barrell asks where her face is which continues the theme of invisibility and existence begun earlier when Miss Fitt said she was not really there. Mrs. Rooney apologizes for having bothered Miss Fitt while she was looking for her mother.

She commiserates saying she knows what it is to look for her mother. Meanwhile, the unnamed mother tells her daughter to beware the tracks because the train can suck one under. This foreshadows the end of the play and the death of the child. Mr. Tyler repeatedly asks Miss Fitt if she has lost her mother. He then points out that the 12:30 train has not yet arrived and that one can tell by the signal at the “bawdy hour of nine.” This is another reference to sex in the play and a humorous one as Mr. Barrell stifles a guffaw. Miss Fitt worries the train has left the track and some harm has befallen her “darling mother.” (26)

The train arrives and before she meets her husband she remarks that Mr. Barrell looks as if he has seen a ghost. This subtle detail foreshadows the dénouement at the end of the play. Mrs. Rooney’s husband Dan is accompanied by a small boy named Jerry. When she meets her husband she asks for a kiss which Mr. Rooney refuses out of propriety. Mrs. Rooney asks if his father has been taken away leaving him all alone and the boy answers yes. This is the second orphan in the play. The reader learns that it is Mr. Rooney’s birthday, another element in the theme of pregnancy and birth running through the play.

Mr. Rooney is upset that he has to pay Jerry a penny and Mrs. Rooney pleads with him to be nice to her after her great effort to meet him. They begin the return journey and Mrs. Rooney asks her husband to put his arm around her and so reveals her desire for affection. Dan questions his wife’s ability to lead him and when he says they might fall into a ditch, Mrs. Rooney continues her romantic gestures by replying that it will be like old times. Mr. Rooney rebuffs her advances once more and says he wants to get home quickly so that Mrs. Rooney can read to him. He says of the book, “I think Effie is going



to commit adultery with the Major.” This comment evokes sexuality and indicates Dan is more interested in the romance of novels than with his wife. It may also have musical connotation i.e., a major key.

At the foot of the station stairs Mrs. Rooney sees a donkey and says it is a true donkey, its father and mother were donkeys. This is another allusion to family in general and children in particular. Next, Mr. and Mrs. Rooney get into a fight about the reason for the train’s delay which Mr. Rooney refuses to divulge. At this point the couple hears children’s cries and Mrs. Rooney says it is the Lynch twins jeering at them. Mr. Rooney wonders aloud if the children will pelt them with mud today. The old couple turns to face the children and scare them away. Mrs. Rooney tells her husband to threaten them with his cane. Just following, Mr. Rooney asks, “Did you ever wish to kill a child? [*Pause.*] Nip some young doom in the bud. [*Pause.*] Many a time at night, in winter, on the black road home, I nearly attacked the boy. [*Pause.*] Poor Jerry! [*Pause.*] What restrained me then? [*Pause.*] Not fear of man. [*Pause.*] Shall we go on backwards now a little?” This sinister comment increases the tension and theme of the death of children building in the play. It is also contains a reference to Dante who, in the Inferno, condemns the seers to walking backwards with deformed and reversed torsos. They were condemned to forever look behind them for having tried to see the future in the world of the living. Perhaps this reference by Dan betrays feelings of guilt.

Mr. Rooney finally relents and begins to tell his wife the story of his train ride but is interrupted by his wife continues to make comments about relationships and her own poor condition. When the couple hears a cry in the distance Mrs. Rooney remarks, “Mrs. Tully I fancy. Her poor husband is in constant pain and beats her unmercifully.” (33)

Curiously, the husband is the one in constant pain despite the wife being the one beaten unmercifully. Mrs. Rooney also twice interrupts to say she feels cold, weak, and faint.

When Mr. Rooney finishes his story which does not reveal the reason for the train's delay, Mrs. Rooney immediately launches into an anecdote about having attended a lecture given by a "mind doctor." The doctor had treated a little girl unsuccessfully for some time. He knew only that she was dying and when he finally gave up on her, she died shortly thereafter. Sometime afterward he realized the cause of her illness to be that "she had never really been born." Mrs. Rooney says this phrase had haunted her ever since. This is another example of the theme of motherhood, childbirth and death that is developed in this play. This particular anecdote, together with Miss Fitt's claim to "not be there" recalls Beckett's attendance of a lecture by the psychologist Carl Jung, during the course of which similar remarks were made. James Knowlson, in Damned to Fame, recounts this experience when he writes, "On October 2, 1935, for example, Beckett went to dinner with Bion [Beckett's therapist] at the Etoile restaurant on Charlotte street, before going as his guest to hear the third lecture in a series of five given by C. G. Jung for the Institute of Psychological Medicine at the Tavistock Clinic. The lecture stayed in his mind for many years."<sup>13</sup>

The themes of mother, daughter, and lover are developed in this play by way of Mrs. Rooney's memories and interactions with the men she meets on her way to the train station. These themes are also elaborated in her conversation with her husband Dan. These themes are always associated with death and loss. In this way they help to create the dark atmosphere of the play.

#### 4.6 Mrs. Rooney and May Beckett

Many critics discuss May Beckett's death as a turning point in Beckett's life claiming that this event allowed him to finally be free of his mother's influence. These same critics often view Beckett's relationship with her in black and white terms and draw the conclusion that Beckett spent most of his life trying to escape her.

The following quote from All that Fall is an interesting example of Beckett's attitudes toward gender in the second English period in its sympathetic view of the life of suffering the protagonist has endured, as well as, possibly, a reference to his mother's death:

Give her a good welt on the rump. [*Sound of welt. Pause.*] Harder! [*Sound of welt. Pause.*] Well! If someone were to do that for me I should not dally. [*Pause.*] How she gazes at me to be sure, with her great moist cleg-tormented eyes! Perhaps if I were to move on, down the road, out of her field of vision.... [*Sound of welt.*] No, no, enough! Take her by the snaffle and pull her eyes away from me. Oh this is awful! [*She moves on. Sound of her dragging feet.*] (...) Oh, I am just a hysterical old hag I know, destroyed with sorrow and pining and gentility and church going and fat and rheumatism and childlessness. [*Pause. Brokenly.*] Minnie! Little Minnie! [*Pause.*] Love, that is all I asked, a little love, daily, twice daily, fifty years of twice daily love like a Paris horse-butcher's regular, what normal woman wants affection? A peck on the jaw at morning, near the ear, and another at evening, peck, peck, till you grow whiskers on you. There is that lovely laburnum again. (13-14)

Mrs. Rooney is at first playful and jokes about the effect a good welt on the rump would have on her. This mood quickly changes; however as she observes the horse's eyes and begins to feel sorry for it. This leads to her reflection on her own life of suffering. She regrets first her age "hysterical old hag" and physical decrepitude "destroyed", "fat and rheumatism", then her solitude and childlessness. She laments not only her own condition but her sorrow is such that she calls out the name of what may be presumed a lost child, Minnie. The old age mentioned here is developed as Mrs. Rooney reflects on her physical decline and failing health. When Mrs. Rooney calls out for Minnie, she simultaneously regrets her lost child and her lost childhood. Retracing her own life, she

then regrets the lost opportunities of the prime of her life and her failed search for love. Her life as a devout member of the church proves another force of decay and dissolution. This characteristic recalls Beckett's mother who, by all accounts, was a devout woman her entire life.

There is also more poetic repetition and alliteration in this passage. The word 'peck' dots the passage and the words "love" and "daily" are repeated. The most alliterative phrases are, "what normal woman wants", "daily love like", and "There is that lovely laburnum again."

This passage is especially rich in meaning if considered together with a remark Beckett made about his mother's illness and suffering. James Knowlson discusses how Beckett returned to his family home in Foxrock every year to spend a month with his mother. And upon each visit her deterioration from Parkinson's disease was all the more evident.

Beckett commented upon one such visit, "I gaze into the eyes of my mother, never so blue, so stupefied, so heart-rending – the eyes of an issueless childhood, that of old age... these are the first eyes I think I truly see. I do not need to see others; there is enough there to make one love and weep."<sup>14</sup> In particular, the emphasis on vision and eyes are common to both texts. The power of the eyes to stir up emotion is evoked by looking into the eyes of another living being. This is because looking into the eyes of another leads to introspection. When Mrs. Rooney looks into the eyes of the suffering beast it causes her to reflect on her own life of suffering. The gaze that starts as an experience of the other results in a mirroring effect. Perhaps the experience was similar for Beckett when he looked into his dying mother's eyes.

Ultimately, Mrs. Rooney provides an excellent contrast to Beckett's earlier depictions of womanhood. Here, the protagonist has a depth of character based on her family relationships, solitude, and suffering. She has much more in common with Beckett's male characters of the early works than the females.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a close study of Beckett's radio play All that Fall, to demonstrate that with a return to writing in English Beckett returns to a writing style more similar to that of his earlier works written in English than those of the French period. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that this play which inaugurates Beckett's return to English has a distinct Irish setting, biographical references from the author's youth, and a highly developed female protagonist. Of course, certain dark themes that are found in almost all of his work are also found in this play. The themes of death and decay Beckett so often revisits in his work find a unique expression in All that Fall. In this play, the suffering of man is depicted through a woman. Death, which is so often associated with old age, menaces the children of this play.

The structure of the play is based on three movements and takes the protagonist on a round trip journey to the Boghill train station. The circularity of this journey reflects and reinforces the circularity of life and death as they are presented in the play. But the usual cycle of life is beset with problems as the young fail to live and the old fail to die. Mrs. Rooney speaks of the child called Minnie that she lost. Mr. Tyler loses his grandchild to miscarriage or abortion and a young child falls to his death under the train during the play. In contrast, Mrs. Rooney is "reborn" in a parody of birth when she

emerges from Mr. Slocum's automobile and Dan, in spite of his old age, wonders if he will ever die.

Beckett's use of language in this play is vastly different from his French works. This play, though not stated explicitly, is clearly set in Ireland. Furthermore, this is the Ireland of Beckett's youth. The wealth of names from the author's childhood that Knowlson has exposed prove that at least in part this play springs from the author's early memories of life in Foxrock. This is categorically different from the setting and characters with which we are faced in a play like En attendant Godot. Beckett also seems to take joy in writing in English as evidenced by the variety of idiomatic and slang expressions he incorporates in the dialogue.

In addition to the theme of death mentioned above, Beckett also revisits the theme of decay in this work. The author subtly builds this theme around the various machines that appear and their break downs. As these machines are introduced they increase in size, power and danger. First is Christy's cart that remains immobile when his mule refuses to advance. Then there is Mr. Tyler whose bicycle gets a flat tire, followed by Mr. Slocum whose car is at a halt when the engine dies. Finally, there is the train that is delayed. What these machines all have in common is their vulnerability to failure and their potential to harm or kill the living. This theme could be found in any of the three periods of Beckett's career I have outlined. Beckett's choice of English to write this play does not affect it.

The structural similarity of Beckett's play to Schubert's sonata "Death and the Maiden" as elaborated by Berge, is striking. This demonstrates that Beckett's use of a new medium, radio, influenced his work. This is also a notable difference with the

French work. Although En attendant Godot, has often been compared to vaudeville, it does not make extensive use of music as in this radio play. One could make the argument, since the characters speak their lines in rhythm, that this play is as much a musical composition as a theatrical one. In the French period Beckett sought to remove the music from his language. In this play, he has found a way to join them in such a way as one begins to be indistinguishable from the other.

Schubert's sonata provides Beckett with a three-movement structure and fits perfectly with the main theme he elaborates, namely the death of the young. Beckett is also able to incorporate the sonata as one of the background sounds that gives the play the spatial illusion of depth.

Beckett's female protagonist, Mrs. Rooney, marks a dramatically different depiction of women in his work. She is not the young and sensual threat to a male hero. Although sensuality is still at times at issue, it is presented in a very different way. Mrs. Rooney laments her lost love and her lost child. Any physical notion of love is parodied or only implied as in the case with Mr. Tyler and her "birth" from Mr. Slocum's automobile.

The female is presented in a more comprehensive way in this work than in any of the earlier English works or French period works. Indeed, the only allusion to a woman in En attendant Godot, is the reference to the woman who gives birth astride a grave. Mrs. Rooney, however, is presented through her memories as a mother figure and a lover. She is also depicted as a devoted wife who gives her husband a tie for his birthday and makes the grueling trip to the station to surprise him. She is also presented as a daughter by way of her numerous allusions to her mother. Family is important to her and this is

evident when she enquires of everyone she meets about family. She is constantly asking her fellow townspeople about their wives, husbands, parents, children, and grandchildren. This depiction of a woman is a far cry from the prostitutes and morons of the earlier English writing and the lack of women in the French writing.

Mrs. Rooney's speech about the hinny's eyes may be partially inspired by Beckett's similar remarks about his own mother. Certainly, the two texts share a quiet pain and introspection based on looking into another living being's eyes. Beckett's critics have remarked that images of women in Beckett's later writing recall his mother. I have remarked on one of those works, Footfalls, in Chapter 3. However, no one has proposed that Mrs. Rooney may in some ways suggest Beckett's mother.

I contend that Mrs. Rooney embodies some of May Beckett and that this is a result of Beckett's return to his mother tongue. This return has led to his homeland, his youth, and ultimately, his mother.

#### **4.8 Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Knowlson, James pp. 377, 386

<sup>2</sup> Knowlson, James. For a detailed explanation of origins of names and other similarities with Foxrock, Ireland in All that Fall, see Chapter 17 "Impasse and Depression" pp. 377-400

<sup>3</sup> Beckett, Samuel All that Fall p.3

<sup>4</sup> Berge, Marit Gallie p. 48

<sup>5</sup> Sadie, Stanley. Grove Concise Dictionary of Music edited by Macmillan Publishers New York 1994 p. 488

<sup>6</sup> Sadie, Stanley. p.488

<sup>7</sup> Sadie, Stanley. p. 488

<sup>8</sup> Berge, Marit Gallie p. 51

<sup>9</sup> Berge, Marit Gallie p. 51



<sup>10</sup> Clements, Andrew “Schubert: Death and the Maiden” The Guardian 15 June, 2001

<sup>11</sup> Clements, Andrew

<sup>12</sup> Beckett, Samuel. All that Fall. Henceforth page numbers will directly follow citations.

<sup>13</sup> Knowlson, James p. 170

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Knowlson, James p. 333

## CHAPTER 5. BECKETT'S HAPPY DAYS

This chapter will propose a close study of Beckett's play Happy Days, both structurally and thematically, in order to further explain Beckett's return to English. The first section will explore Beckett's division of the play into two complementary movements that underscore themes of circularity similar to those developed in En attendant Godot. The repetition of setting and themes from one act to the next universalizes these themes. I shall refer to Acts I and II as movements because of the way they function musically, i.e., with repetition and variations on a theme, and also because of the importance of music in the play (Winnie's song). Music, however, is not as central to this play as we found it to be in All that Fall.

One of the author's main concerns in this work is language and how the protagonist uses words to insulate herself from the harsh reality she faces. Her language is pushed to the breaking point as she struggles with her fading memory and makes a Herculean effort to always keep speaking as though her very existence depended on it. The main character's unusual reliance on language will provide a transition to the major themes of the play: stasis and decline.

The familiar themes of age, suffering, solitude, decay, and loneliness are all touched upon in this play. I shall discuss how the development of these ideas ties this play to Beckett's earlier work in both French and English in order to demonstrate a consistency of theme across all three periods. This consistency will serve to contrast the stylistic changes that occur over the same periods, along with Beckett's evolving attitude toward gender, specifically, the portrayal of women.

I will also analyze a possible source for Happy Days in Dante's Inferno. A striking parallel exists between the imagery found in Beckett's play and Canto X of the Inferno. In spite of the comprehensive studies of the play by leading Beckett scholars such as S.E. Gontarski, who published both the production notebook and bilingual edition of Happy Days, and James Knowlson, who published a manuscript study of Happy Days, wrote Beckett's biography, and founded the Beckett International Foundation, this source has remained almost completely unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> Canto X of the Inferno provides an excellent point of departure for a study of both the structure of Beckett's play and the themes it develops. As for the former, the powerful image of the various stages of being buried alive is found in Dante. Several of Beckett's most important themes, such as memory, language, and human suffering, are also found in this episode of the Inferno. A comparison of the two works may also be useful for any consideration of the literary allusions, particularly those from Milton, and how they relate to man's suffering, his dignity, and his potential revolt from God.

Next, I will discuss Winnie in relation to Beckett's earlier female characters to demonstrate the contrast between Beckett's early sketches of women and his later, more psychologically developed, female protagonists. The chapter will conclude with a discussion Winnie and May Beckett based on one potentially biographical detail in the text that ties Winnie to Beckett's mother, May. I will consider to what extent the women are similar and why Beckett's relationship with his mother is significant to an understanding of Beckett's later work.

## 5.1 Plot Structure: Two Movements

Happy Days is a play in two acts with two characters. The set is sparse, comprising only a mound covered with scorched grass in which the protagonist Winnie, a middle-aged woman, is buried up to the waist. Her companion, Willie, lies almost out of sight behind the mound. Stage directions call for blazing light. The combined effect of the scenery and lighting is one of unforgiving brightness that conveys the heat and aridity of Winnie's environment. In both acts, she delivers what is essentially one long monologue while Willie says very few words. In Act II, she is buried to the neck.

Winnie passes her time between "the bell for waking and the bell for sleep"<sup>2</sup> by following a very exact routine. At the beginning of the day, she prays, brushes her teeth, and removes the items from her bag. She places these items in specific places around her where they remain until she has use for them. At the end of the day she carefully collects them all and places them back in the bag. Winnie passes her time speaking to her companion, Willie, who ignores her for the most part, straining to remember things, and occupying herself with the contents of her bag.

Winnie possesses a potent optimism and, for this reason, draws a sharp contrast with the other strong female character studied in the previous chapter, Mrs. Rooney. Although both characters suffer the ravages of age and decay, Mrs. Rooney is much more pessimistic. Her health is precarious and she fears the physical suffering and death that afflict all those around her in All that Fall. Winnie, in contrast, is much worse off because she is slowly dying as the earth swallows her. Yet her optimism in the face of this horrific fate is undiminished. The juxtaposition of Winnie's torment with her sanguinity facilitates the dark comedy and irony of the play. The scope of this

dissertation, however, does not allow for a comprehensive comparison of these two works, in part because both plays are from the second English period and it is my aim to discern trends across the linguistic periods I have outlined and not necessarily within them. Consequently, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is preferable to compare Happy Days with a play from the French period, En attendant Godot.

The similar features of these two works have not gone unnoticed by critics. The overall structure, i.e., a play in two acts in which protagonists appear in pairs, is common to both. Winnie and Willie, Estragon and Vladimir, and Pozzo and Lucky are all complementary pairs that rely on one another for survival. Just as Vladimir fears separation from Estragon to the point that he will not let the latter sleep, Winnie relies on Willie for companionship. She expresses her anxiety and fear of solitude when she instructs him, “Don’t go off on me again now dear will you please, I may need you.” (22) She is dependent on him foremost as an interlocutor, for she needs someone to whom she can direct her speech. Vladimir and Estragon also rely on each other as listeners. For all of these characters, it is not enough to speak into the void; language must be directed at someone.

The plots of both Happy Days and En attendant Godot follow an analogous development and are characterized by modified repetition with a striking decline in Act II. Both plays begin, in medias res, during the day with two characters and both end Act I when night falls suddenly. Act II repeats the events of Act I with some variation. In both plays, the length of time that has elapsed between acts is called into question. In En attendant Godot, the tree has sprouted a few leaves. This change has been interpreted to indicate many things, including a harbinger of positive change, the arrival of a new

season, and the cycle of life and death. Act II is nonetheless characterized by degeneration as Pozzo is now blind and Vladimir's frustration is expressed in his discourse on the cruelty of birth and the brevity of life. Happy Days begins Act II with a more conspicuous change; Winnie is now buried up to her neck. What this change may reveal about the passage of time is unclear because the spectator has no point of reference. It is unclear how long Winnie has been in her present situation and at what speed she is being consumed by the mound. Time is a highly developed and complex theme in both plays. In En attendant Godot, it is related to blindness and in Happy Days it is related to "the old style." Beckett's treatment of time in Happy Days will be addressed in greater detail in Section Four.

The plots of both works rely heavily on dialogue and monologue. Unlike All that Fall, there is no journey to accomplish. With the exception of the bowler hats and Winnie's bag, language is the engine that drives the story forward. Since there is no action to move the plot forward the protagonists develop various strategies to pass the time and survive their suffocating environment. In En attendant Godot, the desire to wait for an appointment with a stranger underlies the protagonists' inertia, while in Happy Days Winnie is inexplicably imprisoned in her mound of earth. The former work maintains the possibility, however unlikely, that Vladimir and Estragon may simply abandon their engagement and move on, while in the latter the protagonist exercises no control over her worsening condition.

The characters in both plays employ similar means for fending off boredom and its dangerous byproduct, introspection. These characters avoid self-awareness at all costs and in this effort, their most reliable aid is language. The characters speak endlessly

about all manner of subjects. Their conversation ranges from utter banalities to thorny points of theology. Any topic that allows the dialogue to continue is valid. And when language inevitably fails, Beckett's protagonists resort to the manipulation of objects to pass the time until they are able to resume speaking.

On the surface these two plays seem to have a great deal in common. It is important to note, however, one striking difference: women are almost entirely absent from En attendant Godot and men are almost entirely absent from Happy Days and yet, many of the same themes are developed in both works. Beckett's treatment of gender in Happy Days will be discussed further in Section 5.

## **5.2 Language: Failed Attempts to Create a Narrative**

When considering the plays that constitute Beckett's return to English, it is important to note the author's treatment of language. In All that Fall, language was identifiably Irish and filled with biographical references. These characteristics were in contrast to the language of the French works. In Happy Days, the language is stagnant and consists of one character's failed attempts to create a narrative. Winnie employs three principal resources to get through her day, which I will address in order: language, Willie, and the black bag. Language is by far the most important. Winnie will struggle to retain the first two supports throughout the entire play, and the third will effectively be taken from her at the end of Act I.

David Pattie, in his book, The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett, arrives at an important insight when he remarks that Winnie "creates a world from the fragments of a previous existence."<sup>3</sup> These efforts are primarily linguistic and doomed from the start precisely because she has only fragments with which to work. As she tries to piece

together this fragmented past, her memory inevitably fails her and when this happens, she feels threatened. She attempts to recall literary quotes but only half succeeds. “What is that wonderful line?” (24) she says. She indulges in the memory of what is presumably her first love when she conjures up the past, “I close my eyes... and am sitting on his knees again.” Coming out of her reverie, she exclaims, “Oh the happy memories!” and it is clear that Winnie’s “happy days” are dependent on these memories. When she continues to reminisce, this time about her first kiss, some doubt creeps in. Was it Mr. Johnston or *Johnstone*? Whose toolshed was it in? Was it even in a toolshed at all? These doubts threaten the story Winnie tells and her greatest fear is that the story and, thus, her existence will come grinding to a halt.

In order to appreciate Winnie’s struggle with language, it is worthwhile to note the significance of narrative. One may pose the question: What is the importance of a story, particularly a life story? One could argue that stories serve to shape the world and allow one to know his place in it. When the disparate events of life are woven together in a story, they gain cohesiveness and coherence. The story invites interpretation. This in turn leads to a search for meaning and purpose. A story provides a link from the past to the present and is intricately tied to one’s conception of the passage of time. Armed with knowledge of the past and present, perhaps one can glean what the future has in store.

Winnie’s life story, however, has become fragmented and unintelligible. The spectator is given no explanation of how Winnie came to be in her present situation. With no reference point, the significance of the occurrences of her life is lost because it is impossible to determine how these events have transformed her. Winnie recounts past events but they remain disconnected and do not move toward a telos. Winnie’s world is



static, “No better, no worse, no change.” (22) And for this reason Winnie’s concept of time is singular. She speaks of a past that was different and refers to this previous existence when she says, “to speak in the old style.” (28) These eras are completely divorced from one another.

In Beckett’s production notebook for Happy Days, one complete page is dedicated to “time.” The first of nine listed remarks is “old styles!”<sup>4</sup> Winnie’s relation to time will be developed more in Section Four. What is important to note here is that there is a break between Winnie’s past and present which she is unable to bridge either with her memories or rituals.

Winnie imagines the consequences of no longer taking the pains to speak and envisages her own disintegration, “And if for some strange reason no further pains are possible, why then just close the eyes... and wait for the day to come... the happy day to come when flesh melts at so many degrees.” (28) If Winnie were to stop speaking, she would cease to exist, consumed by blaze of her surroundings.

Willie plays an important role in Winnie’s linguistic strategy. He serves to confirm her existence by listening to her. Despite participating only minimally in conversation with her, Willie is a reference point for Winnie and reinforces her sense of self. Just as she fears a breakdown of language, she fears the loss of a listener. She says,

Ah, yes, if only I could bear to be alone, I mean prattle away with not a soul to hear. (*Pause.*) Not that I flatter myself you hear much, no Willie, God forbid. (*Pause.*) Days perhaps when you hear nothing. (*Pause.*) But days too when you answer. (*Pause.*) So that I may say at all times, even when you do not answer and perhaps hear nothing, something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could never bear to do... (31-32)

Language is not enough; Winnie requires a listener and a companion. She lacks the strength necessary to face the invincible void alone.

In Act II, Willie remains largely out of sight and for this reason contributes to Winnie's growing difficulties with her memory, the increasing fragmentation of her stories, and, ultimately, the potential breakdown of her language. Winnie compensates for Willie's absence with a bizarre Cartesian proof. She reasons, "I say I used to think that I would learn to talk alone. (*Pause.*) By that I mean to myself, the wilderness. (*Smile.*) But no. (*Smile broader.*) No no. (*Smile off.*) Ergo you are there." (65-66) In the earlier quote, Winnie and the wilderness were separate and now they are joined. Winnie's survival is threatened because she has interiorized the void that earlier threatened her. She perseveres by transforming Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," into "I speak, therefore you are." Willie's importance to Winnie is powerfully demonstrated at the end of the play when his "just audible" last word, "Win," elicits an outburst of joy and confidence from Winnie, who shouts, "Oh this *is* a happy day, this will have been another happy day!" Her elation carries her into a song that closes the play.

Finally, when either language or Willie fails her, Winnie relies on her large bag and the many objects it contains as a helpful diversion. At the start of the play Winnie removes a toothbrush and toothpaste, with which she brushes her teeth. When she has finished, she extracts a mirror with which she inspects her teeth and gums. These banal activities of daily life contrast sharply with Winnie's immobility and harsh environment. An activity with some practical value, brushing one's teeth, is transformed into pure ritual with which to start the day. Throughout Act I Winnie will continue to remove and then replace objects in her bag in rote fashion. This permits Winnie to "act" when she is

unable to speak. The juxtaposition of Winnie, half-buried alive, with the triviality of her actions underscores her lack of awareness and, when self-awareness and horror begin to creep in, lends pathos to the play.

Winnie's attempts to create a narrative are continually frustrated. Her memory fails her midway through quotes and recollections. She is easily distracted by reveries and objects she sees. Her train of thought jumps erratically from one idea to the next and prevents her from achieving continuity and cohesiveness in her speech. Despite all of these difficulties, and nearly complete burial, she retains a conquering optimism and, as Beckett put it, "goes down singing."<sup>5</sup>

### **5.3 Familiar Themes: Stasis and Decline**

This section will consider the themes of stasis and decline in Happy Days. The analysis will review the critic Stan Gontarski's work in this area and focus primarily on the themes' development in language. The preceding sections have provided the proper context to further explore Beckett's use of language from a thematic point of view and explore how Winnie succeeds not only in surviving but finding contentment.

Stan Gontarski, in his book, Beckett's Happy Days: A Manuscript Study, states his objective thus,

The purposes of this study are to reconstruct as nearly as possible Samuel Beckett's composition of Happy Days and then to use that information to increase our understanding of the finished product. Furthermore, such genesis study gives us the opportunity to get acquainted with Beckett's creative process, a process especially significant for Beckett studies since the author's characters are often artists themselves, struggling with the problems of creativity.<sup>6</sup>

In this section, I shall examine the two constituent parts of the above statement.

First, I shall trace the salient elements of Gontarski's study with emphasis on his

treatment of the themes of stasis and decline developed in the play. He identifies several strategies the protagonist employs to cope with her worsening condition, and these are worth reviewing. Second, I shall briefly consider Gontarski's treatment of Beckett's creative process.

Gontarski begins his study by reviewing manuscript and textual problems to which Beckett alludes in his novel Watt. The narrator (Sam) makes certain notes in the text that indicate there are problems in the manuscript Watt has given him. For Gontarski, this recalls the long tradition of manuscript study which aims to unlock the secrets of texts through detective work or forensic analysis. The idea is that by correcting compositors' errors, extracting text from decomposed vellum, etc., one can uncover critical details that have been lost to provide a definitive explanation of a difficult text. Gontarski evokes Beckett's interest in the creative process as it is developed in his essay on Proust. In this essay, Beckett distinguishes between the artist who conceives the idea and the writer/artisan who translates it and brings it into being. Gontarski reminds the reader that many of Beckett's most famous works have their roots in very early failures, efforts rejected by a writer well-known for his perfectionism. Gontarski uses the examples drawn from Beckett's own early critical essay, "Proust," and his novel Watt to conclude that manuscript studies of Beckett's work may provide an invaluable resource in attempts to understand Beckett's creative process, intent, and finished works. Gontarski makes a deliberate effort to base his study on sources both in Beckett's fiction and critical works. He supplements these arguments with the opinions of famous critics in favor of manuscript study but he is very direct in stating that this avenue of study cannot be expected to lead to a "simple key" to understanding the author's work.

In the second chapter of his book, Gontarski focuses on primary documents and traces the composition of Happy Days as it developed from an early fragment in a notebook through seven full versions. Gontarski adds to this Alan Schneider's annotated typescript for the world premiere of the play as well as Beckett's directorial notebook for the German production. Gontarski makes the claim that this wealth of documents provides the most complete compositional record of any major work by Beckett. But what will all of this information tell us about the play, its origin, and its purpose?

In the third chapter of the book Gontarski compares Winnie to the Artist, both of whom seek to order the chaos, the latter that one might see more clearly, the former that the chaos might be totally obscured. Her condition is so dire that Winnie fears self-awareness and goes to great lengths to avoid it. Gontarski lists three strategies that Winnie employs to adapt to her environment and avoid introspection: ritual, language, and hope.<sup>7</sup> Winnie's constant filing of her nails and manipulation of the objects in her bag are examples of ritual. Gontarski astutely points out that Winnie's filing of her nails recalls and parodies Joyce's image of the disinterested artist paring his nails in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

The idea of ritual has already been discussed in the preceding sections; however, Gontarski argues that Winnie's use of ritual carries over to her language, which is often repetitive and cyclical. Critics have often pointed out that in Beckett's work, language is a complicated issue. Beckett's people have great trouble communicating and struggle, for the most part unsuccessfully, to express themselves with words. As Ihab Hassan observes,

Beckett considers language a dead habit; his rhetoric cunningly demonstrates the point. Sentences end by

denying the assertions with which they began. Questions receive further questions for an answer. Misunderstandings, contradictions, repetitions, and tautologies abound. The syntax is often the syntax of nonsense, the grammar of absurdity. And silence, literal silence invades the interchanges between human beings.<sup>8</sup>

These comments are an excellent characterization of Beckett's use of language in Happy Days. This does not mean, however, that language serves no purpose in Beckett's world. Quite the contrary, Language, though it does not facilitate communication, is an essential tool of survival for Beckett's creatures. Language for most people provides a means for understanding the world. In Beckett's texts, language conceals the world and insulates the individual from it. This protective barrier is a comfort to Beckett's characters. As Gontarski notes, "Language generally in Beckett's world is not a means of conveying meaning, but a balm for the sores of existence."<sup>9</sup>

Ritual, by way of language and habit, provides Winnie with stability, boredom, and, ultimately, contentment. Gontarski points out that dramatic tension is the direct result of ritual's being threatened. When the walls Winnie has erected around herself begin to crack, she is faced with the nothing, the void and even worse, self-awareness. During the first act her defenses are rarely exposed to attack. She is nevertheless acutely aware of the risk of words failing her. She says, "Is that not so, Willie, that even words fail, at times? (*Pause. Back front.*) What is one to do then, until they come again? Brush and comb the hair, if it has not been done, or if there is some doubt, trim the nails if they are in need of trimming, these things tide one over." (34) Even here Winnie is reassured by the safety net of her possessions, their manipulation, and the time-consuming tasks of personal grooming. When words run out, action, though severely limited, takes over and vice versa. In the second act, however, Winnie's range of movement is so greatly

reduced that her capacity to pass the time with her objects is virtually wiped out. Another major weakness in her defenses is that Willie is apparently gone. Winnie's capacity for self-delusion is tested but not exceeded, for she simply wills him to be there and continues speaking as if there were no doubt of his presence.

In broad terms, Winnie's immobility may be seen to represent the helplessness of old age, the isolation of the human condition, and the inevitability of death. Nonetheless, what is important is that Winnie does continue to talk and say things such as, "another happy day," (16) while in the most desperate situation. Her triumph is not merely her survival but above all, in her unyielding efforts to keep speaking and transform her bleak existence into "another happy day."

#### **5.4 Happy Days and Inferno, Canto X**

Samuel Beckett's interest in Dante, and in particular, the Divine Comedy is well known. This is no surprise since Beckett studied Italian and read Dante in the original at Trinity College. From very early on, he did not hide his admiration for the great poet either in his academic writing or his fiction. As Mary Bryden points out in her essay, "No Stars without Stripes: Beckett and Dante," Beckett was interested in number games and particularly fascinated with the meticulous numerical structure and symmetry of the Divine Comedy.<sup>10</sup> An early example of Beckett's interest in Dante can be found in his essay, "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico. . Joyce." In his essay, Beckett points out the structural importance of the number three in a work that consists of three books with thirty-three cantos and written in three-line rhymes. What one might consider the prologue gives the work 100 cantos and thus a completeness and symmetry. Beckett himself constructs a miniature number-game based on the century in the title to his essay, where each period

between names represents 100 years. This gives the chronologically ordered title a symbol with which to show the distance in time between its four authors.

Scholars have identified a great many direct references and other, subtler allusions to Dante in Beckett's work. Some are obvious, as Christopher Ricks points out when he writes, "... [the] first story in his first work of fiction, More Pricks than Kicks, in 1934, is called Dante and the Lobster."<sup>11</sup> Beckett also names the protagonist of this work Belacqua, after the indolent figure in Dante's Purgatory. More obscure references to Dante can be found throughout Beckett's writing and usually consist of a quotation or passing allusion. Michael Robinson, in his essay, "From purgatory to inferno: Beckett and Dante Revisited," remarks on the lack of successful studies on the correlations between Beckett and Dante. He affirms that there is an intertextual dialog to be found in their works, but laments the failures in this area of study when he writes, "And yet the attempt to achieve an accurate notion of this relationship has often been curtailed or even still-born."<sup>12</sup> Robinson argues in his essay that the internal consistency of Beckett's work subverts attempts to define it against the context of previous books like the Inferno or Purgatory. Robinson sums up his view of the influence of Dante on Beckett thus: "In the Divina Commedia, he created a paradigm against which Beckett repeatedly measures his personal view of life...Above all, however, Dante provides Beckett with landscapes and images which function as analogues of the often tenuous situations and experiences that he describes."<sup>13</sup> Robinson evokes critics' desire to associate a given text by Beckett with the Inferno or Purgatory. He argues that this leads to confusion and that when speaking of the Inferno or Purgatory, no direct and consistent parallel can be maintained, as there may be references to both in a single work. There is no question that Dante



provides Beckett with very useful landscapes and images, and perhaps a thorough investigation may reveal that at least in one case, a direct and consistent parallel can be maintained between the two authors' works. But first it is necessary to review Beckett's attitude toward the study of his own work.

If Beckett did not hide his admiration for Dante by including numerous allusions to him in his writings, he certainly concealed the meaning of those allusions very well. For example, Colin Duckworth, in the introduction to Waiting for Godot, discusses the possible influence of Dante on the play. Like most critics, he attempts to locate the setting of Beckett's play in either hell or Purgatory. He ultimately concludes that it is wrong to view the protagonists as inhabiting Purgatory and recalls asking Beckett about this, "When I mentioned the possibility to Mr. Beckett, his comment was characteristic: 'Quite alien to me, but you're welcome.'"<sup>14</sup> Beckett, of course, maintained a strict policy of not commenting on his own work. Does this, however, mean these investigations should be abandoned? Perhaps the poet whom Beckett studied and admired provided him with more than just landscapes, images, and names.

Beckett's play Happy Days contains one particularly puzzling allusion to Dante. This occurs when the protagonist Winnie repeatedly refers to the "old style" or "sweet old style." (32) As Ruby Cohn has pointed out in her work, The Comic Gamut, this is likely a reference to the "dolce stil nuovo" or "sweet new style" of thirteenth and fourteenth century Florentine poets. Winnie demonstrates her knowledge of literature, in spite of her fading memory, when she quotes great works by authors such as Milton, Shakespeare, Browning, Keats and Yeats. Given this fact, her knowledge of Italian renaissance poetry is not per se unusual. However, the number of times she repeats this

phrase together with her changing the “new” to “old” may point to a deeper meaning than is immediately evident. Where might an investigation of this phrase lead? Could it shed some light on the play as a whole? To answer these questions one must examine this phrase further and where better to start than with the author’s own comments.

In a letter to Alan Schneider, dated 3.9.61, Beckett wrote, “Old style’ and smile always provoked by word ‘day’ and derivatives or similar. There is no more day in the old sense because there is no more night, i.e. nothing but day. It is in a way an apologetic smile for speaking in a style no longer valid. ‘Old style’ suggests also of course old calendar before revision. ‘Sweet old style’ joke with reference to Dante’s ‘*dolce stil nuovo*.’ [SB underlines “*nuovo*”]”<sup>15</sup> These remarks are very useful because they explain that what provokes Winnie to say “old style” is the word “day” because days in the usual sense no longer exist in her world. Beckett also remarks that the phrase suggests the old calendar. Thus far Beckett is concerned with the passage of time and how it is marked by days and calendars. The last comment presents the phrase as a joke on the “sweet new style” with “new” underlined. However, even with the author’s explanation, the significance of the “sweet new style,” beyond a simple joke, is not immediately evident. Time seems to be what ties all three remarks together. Thus far, critics tend to use Beckett’s remarks to argue that Winnie’s use of this phrase is a nostalgic evocation of the past when her situation was different. Unfortunately, Beckett’s comments about Winnie’s “sweet old style” do little to answer the above questions. Perhaps an examination of the “sweet new style” and its significance with respect to Dante will be more revealing.

The “dolce stil nuovo” or “sweet new style” refers to a style of poetry that gained popularity in Dante’s time. It was written in the vernacular and quickly surpassed the previously dominant Sicilian school. What distinguished the sweet new style was its belief in the spiritually enlightening effect of love for a woman. The idea was that by singing the praise of an angel who had taken the form of a woman, the poet could transcend physical and emotional love and discover the path to eternal salvation. This is quite different from the other major contemporary movement in poetry being developed by the troubadours in Occitania. Their idea of courtly love was based on the feudal relationship that existed between a knight and his lord. This love is also platonic but inspires the poet to the accomplishment of great deeds in service to his lady rather than divine knowledge.

As for Dante’s involvement with this school, he fervently supported its innovations. So much so that he wrote his first book, the Vita Nuova, in which he celebrates his love for Beatrice, in the new style. Furthermore, Dante dedicated the book to another leading poet of the “sweet new style” school, Guido Cavalcanti. Three times in the Vita Nuova Dante calls him his best friend, “primo amico,” and even credits Cavalcanti with convincing him to write in the vernacular rather than Latin. Given the influence Cavalcanti had on his writing, it is not hard to imagine that Dante would speak of him at some point in The Divine Comedy. But here the careful reader is disappointed, for Guido Cavalcanti never appears directly in the text. However, his father, Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti, does appear in the Inferno. Winnie’s allusion to Dante has led directly to Guido Cavalcanti and Canto X of the Inferno, where the two converge by way of the

latter's father. An analysis of this canto may reveal more about Winnie and the structure of Happy Days.

In Canto X of the Inferno, Virgil and Dante arrive in the sixth circle of Hell where the heretics are condemned. In this particular circle the Epicureans are punished for their belief that the soul dies with the body. The contrapasso found here is particularly fitting, for they are forced to lie in open tombs with fire raining down upon them. This is described at the end of Canto IX, "...for among the tombs flames were scattered, whereby they were made to glow all over, hotter than iron need be for any craft. Their covers were all raised up, and such dire laments were issuing forth from them as truly seemed to come from people wretched and suffering." (Inferno. IX, 118-123)

From the start, the reader is reminded of Happy Days in several ways. The blazing sun and "hellish" heat that burn Winnie and Willie here find their analogue in the fire that rains down and the extreme heat of the tombs. Willie lies hidden from the spectator's view just as the condemned lie in their tombs hidden from Dante. Winnie is partially buried and therefore "entombed."

As the travelers enter this circle, Dante asks Virgil if he may speak with its inhabitants since he sees the tombs are uncovered. Virgil answers that he may and, anticipating a question Dante has not yet asked, says he shall also have the answer to the question he holds silent. As Deborah Parker points out in her essay "Canto X," Dante has long been anticipating his arrival here and meeting with Farinata degli Uberti, the powerful leader of the Ghibellines. Dante had earlier asked Ciacco whether he would find Farinata and other political figures in Heaven or hell. Ciacco replied that these men were among the worst sinners in hell. Here Parker believes Dante's anticipation begins

to build. She writes, “And we too anticipate this meeting with Farinata. Such an elaborate preparation is seldom used in the Comedy: Dante leads us to expect something extraordinary out of the encounter with Farinata, and we are not disappointed.”<sup>16</sup> Virgil also senses Dante’s anticipation and is therefore able to intuit his desire to see Farinata.

Farinata overhears Dante speaking to his guide and, having recognized the Tuscan accent, calls out to him. Dante hesitates out of fear and also perhaps because he cannot see the damned lying in their tombs. Virgil scolds, “Turn round! What are you doing? See there Farinata who has risen erect: from the waist up you will see him all.” (31-33) Farinata strikes an imposing figure that Dante describes thus, “Already I had my eyes fixed on his, and he rose upright with chest and brow thrown back as if he had great scorn of Hell...” (34-36) Virgil, seeing Dante still diffident, gives him a shove between the tombs toward Farinata saying only, “Let your words be fitting.” (39) Here a distinct parallel between Farinata and Winnie is evident as both figures are visible only from the waist up. Winnie does not share Farinata’s disdain for their respective predicaments. She does, however, parallel Farinata, by hardly acknowledging her suffering. She prevails over her circumstances by way of willed contentment.

Farinata begins the exchange by asking Dante who his ancestors were. The answer will immediately determine whether Dante is friend or foe. As Parker notes, “Once he establishes that Dante's family were enemies to him, to his ancestors, and to his party, the exchange degenerates into a fierce series of insults and taunts along party lines...”<sup>17</sup> In the ensuing argument, Farinata brags that he sent Dante’s party into exile twice over. Dante retorts that his people returned both times but that when Farinata’s Ghibellines were exiled, they did not “learn that art” (51) so well.

At precisely this moment, Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti pops his head up in the adjoining tomb and interrupts their conversation. Dante writes, "Then there arose to sight alongside of him a shade, visible to the chin: I think he had raised himself on his knees ... he said, weeping, "If you go through this blind prison by reason of high genius, where is my son, and why is he not with you?" (52-54, 58-60). As Parker points out, this interruption is quite a contrast to the highly anticipated meeting of Dante and Farinata. This question also reveals Cavalcante's principal concern is for his son, Dante's friend, Guido Cavalcante. Also, despite the stinging blow just delivered by Dante, Farinata remains silent throughout Cavalcante and Dante's conversation.

In an attempt to understand these two exchanges, most critics tend to study them separately. Parker views them as functioning together and writes of Cavalcante, "His sudden appearance makes for good theater, and it is an effective way of punctuating and emphasizing the last point Dante makes in the exchange, but we need to examine the relation of these two parts of the canto rather than treating them as separate episodes."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Cavalcante's appearance does make good theater and perhaps that is why Beckett incorporates striking parallel images of Winnie in Acts I and II of Happy Days. Cavalcante also recalls Willie, who lies on his back most of the time and is rarely seen. But what is more important here is Cavalcante's worry for his son. His principal concern with family draws a sharp contrast to Farinata's singular interest in politics. Here is a good example of what defines Dante's hell and the souls within it: division. Hell is a highly compartmentalized realm containing complex levels, circles, and punishments as a reflection of the sins that divide men instead of bringing them together. In the case of Farinata and Cavalcante, their political rivalry was highly divisive. It caused much

bloodshed and sent many families into exile. In spite of this, one might expect the two to come together in the face of their shared predicament, but even in hell they remain steadfast enemies and will not speak to each other. Ultimately, however, these two demonstrate a common obsession with the lives they have left behind and in this they are similar to Winnie.

The question Cavalcante asks concerning the whereabouts of his son is important for two reasons. First, as has already been noted, Cavalcante's main concern is family, hence his son. Second, he is ignorant of the purpose of the poet's journey. Dante explains, "I come not of myself. He who waits yonder, whom perhaps your Guido had in disdain, is leading me through here." (61-63) Cavalcante notes Dante's use the *passato remoto* (simple past) "ebbe" "had" and thinks his son is dead. He is overwhelmed by Dante's words and replies, "How? Did you say 'he had'? Does he not still live? Does the sweet light not strike his eyes?" Overcome with sadness, Cavalcante falls back into his tomb and out of sight.

Once Cavalcante is out of the picture, Farinata resumes his discourse where he left off. Dante writes, "But the other, that great soul at whose instance I had stopped, changed not his aspect, nor moved his neck, nor bent his side. 'And if,' he said, continuing his first discourse, 'they have ill-learned that art, that fact torments me more than this bed.'" (73-78) Earlier, Cavalcante fell into despair only when he thought his son was dead. And with these remarks it is clear that both men share this obsession with the world of the living, for Farinata says explicitly that earthly affairs are far more important to him than his own suffering. He is pained more by the political defeat and exile of his living family than his own condemnation. That Cavalcante lacks the strength and

contempt of his compatriot is clear when the misunderstanding with Dante knocks him back into his tomb like a great blow.

Farinata continues his discourse and predicts Dante's imminent exile. He also asks the poet why the feud between their families rages so strongly. Dante replies that it is because of the battle at Montaperti that spilled so much blood. For a moment Farinata seems remorseful, sighing and shaking his head. And his tone is apologetic when he reminds Dante that at the Council of Empoli, he alone saved Florence from complete destruction when the others wanted to raze it. In response, Dante softens his tone and even wishes peace on Farinata's soul before changing the subject to the shades' notion of time.

Dante is aware that souls can see the future, as both Ciacco and Farinata have made predictions. He is puzzled, however, by Cavalcante's lack of knowledge of the present and so asks Farinata for clarification.<sup>19</sup> Dante says, "...solve the knot which has here entangled my judgment. It seems, if I hear aright, that you see beforehand what time brings with it, but have a different manner with the present." (95-99) Farinata explains, "Like one who has bad light, we see the things," he said, "which are remote from us: so much does the Supreme Ruler still shine on us; but when they draw near, or are, our intelligence is wholly vain, and unless others bring us word, we know nothing of your human state; wherefore you can comprehend that all our knowledge will be dead from that moment when the door of the future shall be closed." (100-108) Dante now realizes he has made the mistake of assuming that the shades have knowledge of the present and therefore regrets his hesitation to respond to Cavalcante about his son. In fact, the shades see the distant future clearly but as it draws near, their knowledge of it fades. To atone



for his fault, Dante asks Farinata to tell Cavalcante that his son is still among the living and to explain his mistake.

In the latter half of their discussion Dante and Farinata have to some extent reconciled and come to view themselves as, above all, Florentines. As Parker notes, “In asking Farinata to tell Cavalcante this news, Dante is symbolically trying to effect yet another accord — between Farinata, a Ghibelline, and Cavalcante, a Guelph, and also between two men who are connected to one another through the marriage of their children.”<sup>20</sup> Dante is attempting to overcome the partisan divisions to unite former enemies.

For her part, Winnie seems to share the nostalgia and stoicism of both Farinata and Cavalcante. She complains little about her physical discomfort as she struggles with her fading memory to recall her past. Although she does not share Farinata’s scorn, she musters an equally strong force of will to survive. She finds strength in language, specifically, directing her speech to Willie to make it through her “day,” while Farinata finds strength in pride.

Winnie, like the shades in hell, also has an unusual perception of time. In his book, Happy Days: Samuel Beckett’s Production Notebook, James Knowlson writes of Beckett’s comments during one production of Happy Days, “...Winnie could not understand time, for she felt that she existed in a present without end and that the past could have no possible meaning for her.”<sup>21</sup> For both Dante’s condemned and Winnie, there are no longer days to mark the passage of time, only an eternal present in the hellish heat. The present has become disconnected from the past and the future. The shades in Dante’s hell benefit from the ability to see the future and recall their past, in spite of

enduring an excruciating present. Winnie is deprived of the past because of her failing memory and, with no God in Beckett's world to shine on her, she has no concept of the future. Winnie is left to face the incomprehensible present.

In conclusion, Canto X of the Inferno can shed much light on Beckett's Happy Days through a careful analysis of imagery and dramatic structure. These latter devices provided Beckett with raw material with which to build his play. More important, Dante develops themes such as memory, the passage of time, and the endurance of suffering that also interest Beckett and appear in his other works. Although some critics like Michael Robinson believe it is a mistake to look for specific sources and antecedents to Beckett's work in Dante's writing, at least in this case, a strong argument can be made for a consistent parallel. Of course, Beckett adapts these ideas for his own purposes but he retains a great deal of what is found in Canto X and preserves the striking dignity and humanity of Farinata and Cavalcante in Winnie.

In the documentary, "Waiting for Beckett," the author acknowledges, in general terms, his debt to Dante. Reviewer Tane Lee Alves in his review for the East Hampton Independent, recounts the anecdote, "Playwright Israel Horowitz spoke with embarrassment of an encounter with Beckett in the film. He said to the Irish writer, 'We live our life in the space where a door opens and closes.' 'That is quite good,' said Beckett quietly. Horowitz became frustrated with himself. 'Shit! I stole that from you.' 'Shit!' Beckett responded. 'I stole that from Dante me-self.' This recalls Farinata's explanation of the shades' notion of time when he says, "...our knowledge will be dead from that moment when the door of the future shall be closed." (106-108) Perhaps, this was not the only idea he "stole" from Dante.

## 5.5 Winnie and the Stereotype of Women

Linda Ben-Zvi, in her book, Women in Beckett, discusses Winnie's black bag with all of its material possessions that recall memories and an ordinary *woman's* life. The objects, along with the activities they suggest, are the banalities of life that distract one from the terrifying nature of the human condition. Moreover, in this play these objects are constantly handled and their respective functions constantly acted out. This extensive use of props helps fill the lack of movement of bodies while giving the play a vaudeville feel and comedy similar to that of the bowler hats in En attendant Godot. This extended comedy based on props, together with the intense optimism of the female figure Winnie, reflects the enthusiasm with which Beckett composes again in English.

What sets this play apart, however, is the distinctively feminine nature of the main character. Beckett says as much in a recorded conversation he had with the actress Brenda Bruce, who was to play the role of Winnie for the play's Paris premiere. Though he rarely commented on his work at all, much less the meaning of specific texts, he did confide the following to the actress:

He said, "Well, I thought that the most dreadful thing that could happen to anybody, would be not to be allowed to sleep so that just as you're dropping off there'd be a "Dong" and you'd have to keep awake; you're sinking into the ground alive and it's full of ants; and the sun is shining endlessly day and night and there is not a tree.... There'd be no shade, nothing, and that bell wakes you up all the time and all you've got is a little parcel of things to see you through life." He was talking about a woman's life, let's face it. Then he said: "And I thought who would cope with that and go down singing, only a woman."<sup>22</sup>

Beckett's remarks are very revealing in their description of the play. The first quality of Winnie's world that he lists is the impossibility of sleep. Sleep deprivation results in agony and constant awareness. Sleep is also to be feared because it removes half of the speaker-listener equation. Both Vladimir and Winnie dread the time when their

companions will fall asleep and leave them alone in consciousness. Beckett's remarks on the severity of Winnie's existence make it clear that she suffers as much as any of his previous heroes. And while the others, like the Unnamable, survive with supreme effort, Winnie not only lives but attains happiness. Clearly, Beckett sees strength in Winnie that his male characters do not possess because in this regard she is unique.

The female protagonist Winnie stands out among Beckett's heroes for her triumph but also for being vastly different from the author's early female characters. She remains a sexual creature (as does Maddy Rooney), yet she is not a prostitute, idiot, or object of mockery like Beckett's early females. She is a fully developed character with a complex psychology. She grapples with the same difficulties of existence (age, memory, decay, etc.) as Beckett's male heroes from the French period. Winnie represents the change that begins with the return to English and continues throughout the rest of Beckett's writing. First and foremost there are serious female protagonists. Second, the writing is characterized by a prose that moves toward the spareness of Beckett's French style. The author gradually moves away from the exuberance of the language of All that Fall towards a more restrained language. Biographical details continue to appear, especially references to Beckett's mother, throughout the second English period.

Winnie's physical predicament and ultimate demise could be compared to Beckett's mother's slow death from Parkinson's disease, a disease whose progression allowed her to be fully conscious of her own decline towards the inevitable end. Her terrible fate seems to resonate in the character of Winnie, who also faces a horrible death of which she is completely aware. Though the bell rings only once in the first act, it rings six times in the second act. This increase suggests an intensification of Winnie's

suffering. It also serves to ensure she remains awake, therefore fully aware of her suffering and imminent death.

## 5.6 Conclusion

Happy Days is similar in many ways to En attendant Godot. The plot structure, built around two acts in which more or less the same events take place twice, is virtually identical in both plays. The characters come in pairs and suffer in Act I, only to suffer more in Act II. Estragon, Vladimir, and Winnie all depend on language for survival. They depend on the Other to hear them when they speak and thereby confirm their existence. Language is not infallible, however. Like their companions who drift off to sleep or wander away, language constantly threatens to collapse.

Winnie is made to suffer. She endures infernal heat, total immobility, and the frustration of a failing memory. In spite of all this, she remains optimistic and in this key way distinguishes herself from Beckett's male heroes who have come before her. This is not to say that she is simply unaware and thus her survival is effortless. Quite the contrary, Winnie is equal in depth and complexity to all of Beckett's heroes. This is indicated in the parallels she elicits between herself and Farinata and Cavalcante of Dante's Inferno in relation to time, torment, and dignity.

Winnie's fading memory is most often evoked with half-remembered literary quotes. These allusions and echoes form a complex web that develops the themes of failure of mind and body, misery, transitoriness, and disjunction between a harsh reality and willed contentment. I have identified an important source for this play in Dante's Inferno, however further effort to study Winnie's allusions to Shakespeare, Milton, and Keats in this context could be very productive. A comparison of Milton's sympathetic

characterization of Satan in Paradise Lost, with Winnie and Farinata could tell us much about Beckett's play but unfortunately, is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Beckett's Happy Days marks a crucial turning point in his writing. The clear examples I have given of the changes that accompany the author's return to English provide insight into his evolving attitude toward both his writing style and his depiction of women.

## 5.7 Notes

<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Mr. William Osbourne, who writes music theater pieces for the theater troop he founded in 1984, "The Wasteland Company." He has written scholarly articles on women in music, music sociology and theoretical/ philosophical concepts. He compares Winnie to Farinata and Calvacante in the program for his piece Beckett Program I

<sup>2</sup> Beckett, Samuel, and James Knowlson. Happy Days = Oh Les Beaux Jours. A bilingual ed. London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1978. p. 16 Henceforth page numbers will directly follow citations.

<sup>3</sup> Pattie, David p. 83

<sup>4</sup> Knowlson, James Happy Days : The Production Notebook of Samuel Beckett. New York: Grove Press, 1986. p. 67

<sup>5</sup> Ben-Zvi, Linda. p. 50

<sup>6</sup> Gontarski, S.E. Beckett's Happy Days: A Manuscript Study p. 1

<sup>7</sup> Gontarski, S.E. Beckett's Happy Days: A Manuscript Study p. 17

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Gontarski, S.E. Beckett's Happy Days: A Manuscript Study p. 17

<sup>9</sup> Gontarski, S.E. Beckett's Happy Days: A Manuscript Study p. 18

<sup>10</sup> Mary Bryden, "No Stars without Stripes: Beckett and Dante," *Romanic Review*; Nov96, Vol. 87 Issue 4 p. 541

<sup>11</sup> Ricks, Christopher B. Beckett's Dying Words : The Clarendon Lectures, 1990. Oxford New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1993. p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, Michael "From Purgatory to Inferno: Beckett and Dante Revisited" *Journal of Beckett Studies* No. 5 Autumn 1979. p. 34

<sup>13</sup> Robinson, Michael p. 35

<sup>14</sup> Duckworth, quoted in O'Hara, J. D. (ed.), Twentieth century interpretations of Molloy, Malone dies, The unnamable, University Press of Florida Gainesville, 1970 p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Beckett, Samuel, Alan Schneider, and Maurice Harmon. No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett & Alan Schneider. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. p.102-3.

<sup>16</sup> Parker, Deborah “Inferno X” Lectura Dantis No. 1 ed. Tibor Wlassics Brown University Fall 1987 p. 3

<sup>17</sup> Parker, Deborah. p. 3

<sup>18</sup> Parker, Deborah. p. 4

<sup>19</sup> Singleton, Charles The Divine Comedy: Inferno Commentary Princeton, New Jersey Princeton University Press 1979 p. 156

<sup>20</sup> Parker, Deborah p. 4

<sup>21</sup> Knowlson, James p. 150

<sup>22</sup> As quoted in Knowlson, James p. 447

## CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

The fact that Anglo-American and French critics have two very different views of the same works written by Beckett, each group taking for granted that he fits neatly into the literary tradition of their own language, has delayed serious work on his bilingualism. The few studies that exist are limited to Beckett's self-translations and how these "second" versions should be viewed. The study of Beckett's bilingualism over the course of his entire writing career is a more rewarding, if overwhelming endeavor. This approach encompasses Beckett's use of both English and French but is not limited to any one text and its translation. Careful review of Beckett's publishing reveals a ten-year period during which he published new works almost exclusively in French. There are many bilingual authors but what distinguishes Beckett is that he consistently favors one language over the other for a substantial and measurable length of time. Several critics including Harry Cockerham, James Knowlson, and Mary Bryden have found Beckett's switch to French worth studying and their efforts have shed much light on the influence this change had on his writing style. What has been largely ignored in the same context, however, is Beckett's return to English, an event no less important in his writing.

Once the overall structure of the analysis based on three linguistic periods was defined, a consistent method was used to compare representative works from all three periods. The three areas that have been examined, plot structure, language and gender, reveal a great deal about the evolution of Beckett's writing style over time and allow an objective comparison of one period with another.

Murphy, the representative work from the first English period, retains a recognizable plot based on the life and death of its protagonist. The language is



distinctive for its erudition, puns, and complexity. The narrator's attitude toward Celia, the major female character in the text, is best described as thinly veiled misogyny. She, and the other women in the text bear the brunt of the narrator's ridicule and mockery while the male protagonist remains relatively unscathed. Although highly experimental, this early novel easily finds a place in the English literary tradition. Some critics detect an imitation of James Joyce's style in its learning and humor.

Critics have identified two motives that contributed to Beckett's switch to French in 1945. The first is literary and based on Beckett's own comments that French was more exciting and gave him fuller control over his style. The second is biographical and depends on the difficult relationship Beckett had with his mother to explain his departure from Ireland. Regardless of motivation, the writing of the French period differs significantly from the preceding period.

En attendant Godot does not have a conventional plot. The play, in many ways, is static. The two main characters remain in the same place as they await their appointment with the mysterious Godot. Any "action" is limited to repeated standing, sitting, and the manipulation of clothing or the contents of their pockets. The events of Act I are repeated with minor variation in Act II. The language of the play is direct and unadorned. This linguistic austerity is at times taken to the extreme when the protagonists speak only with subjects and infinitive verbs. There are no female characters and only two unfavorable references to women in the entire play.

En attendant Godot clearly demonstrates the change in Beckett's writing style from English to French. The stripped-down lucid prose in this text is a sharp contrast to the ornate rich language he favored previously. Up to this point, Beckett's depiction of

women is consistent. However, with the return to English, there is at first a reappearance of the characteristics of his early writing followed by a more balanced amalgamation of both styles.

If as some critics argue, Beckett was on the verge of writer's block during his work on La Dernière bande in 1955, the unexpected request for a new work from the BBC provided the impetus for him to take a new direction in his writing. The radio play All that Fall may demonstrate a renewed creativity based on the author's return to the mother tongue and with it, an eventual return to the mother through writing. The first aspect of this process is the creation of a female protagonist in All that Fall. Continuing in this direction, Beckett creates a female character and develops feminine themes that more strongly recall his mother in Happy Days. The mother tongue also brings with it a flood of childhood memories. Biographical details present in the early fiction and rare in the French works resurface in these English texts. The return to the mother through the two women in these plays, Maddy Rooney and Winnie, is accompanied by a return to the poetry, allusion, and music of English.

Another factor that may contribute to the strong female characters and echoes of Beckett's mother in the late works is May Beckett's death in 1950. Samuel Beckett, in spite of strong differences of opinion, remained very close to his mother throughout his life. He witnessed her suffering and death and this traumatic experience left memories of strong images etched in his mind. It is reasonable to suggest that these images should reappear in his writing. The late works contain more obvious allusions to May Beckett, but Maddy Rooney and Winnie recall her in several ways, especially the latter. Maddy may be compared to May Beckett in general terms because of her strength and humor. A

comparison with Winnie, however, can be more direct. Winnie's prayer that opens the play recalls May Beckett's devout religious observance. Her middle upper-class dress and attention to personal grooming are also evoke May's respect for decorum and etiquette. Winnie's imprisonment in the mound immobilizes her in Act I and threatens her life in Act II. This decline, coupled with the ringing bell which keeps her awake, is not unlike May Beckett's struggle with Parkinson's disease. This illness slowly destroyed her body but left her mind intact.

Though the main characters in the examples I have chosen are feminine and derive in part from memories of his childhood, Beckett continues to elaborate the same themes as in earlier works, e.g. time, age, memory, language, loneliness, suffering, and failure. It is, above all, the writing style that changes from one period to the next.

The effect of English on Beckett's writing is felt most strongly immediately after the shift occurs when he writes All that Fall. However, by the time he composes Happy Days, characteristics of both periods merge together more evenly. With these plays, Beckett's return to the mother tongue inspires a return to the mother through memories of childhood, strong female protagonists, and thematic exploration of feminine roles. The autobiographical elements I suggest are at work in these plays are not always on the order of defined memories, however. Indeed, they are more often than not left deliberately vague in order to universalize their meaning.

The novel medium of radio led to a prolific period in Beckett's career that matched the output of early French period, albeit with a strong influence of poetry and music on the language and structure of his plays and a reworked depiction of women. The extent of the thematic and structural influence of Schubert's "Death of the Maiden"

and Dante's Inferno, on All that Fall and Happy Days was unprecedented in Beckett's fiction. The latter play also provided a transition back to the theater while retaining much of the feel of radio and furthering the new approach to familiar themes that the radio play establishes.

Ruby Cohn highlights one important and generally accepted notion in Beckett studies, i.e., there is a discernible continuity that runs through Beckett's work regardless of whether he writes in English or French. She points to what elements they have in common such as importance of protagonists, the quest and language. She claims they differ "through variety in events, associations, and above all words." If one considers not just the first English period and the subsequent French works but widens the scope of inquiry to include Beckett's return to English it becomes evident that here, too, one recognizes a continuity of theme and elaboration in Beckett's works. However, this wider view also reveals the immense impact English has on Beckett's later works and that his relationship with his mother is tied not only to the depiction of women in his later works but also to the first strong women protagonists that mark the return to English.

Of course, there remains a great deal of work to do if one is to better understand Beckett's relationship with his mother and the effect her death had on him and his writing. The study of primary documents and more of Beckett's fiction may provide insights into these difficult questions. The aim of this dissertation has been not only to consider Beckett's use of language over his career, with particular emphasis on one linguistic shift as exemplified in two plays, but to reexamine the author's work, raise critical questions, and discover new directions in research. As such, this dissertation lays the groundwork for my further study of Beckett's writing.

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